

Look At Me

Teens, sexting and risks

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive Summary | 4 |
| About The Cybersurvey | 6 |
| Introduction: Fun and flirting, or coercion and blackmail | 8 |
| How relationships change in the digital world | 12 |
| Who shares nudes? | 14 |
| Why did they share nudes? | 20 |
| The underlying issue of emotional health | 24 |
| Sharing under pressure | 30 |
| What happened after the images were shared? | 32 |
| Ripples of risk. The related risks and harms that target vulnerable teens | 38 |
| What else is going on in their offline lives? | 42 |
| Parents' involvement | 48 |
| Cyberbullying and state of mind | 50 |
| Conclusion | 52 |

Executive Summary

A glimpse of digital relationships today for young people

This briefing paper - part of a series from The Cybersurvey - details both who shares nudes and why. It goes on to explore an ecology of related risks sharers encounter.

Drawn from an anonymous sample of young people in schools across the country, here is a profile of life today as a young person. For some teens, technology enables and facilitates relationships without harm, but others suffer intensely. This complexity is a challenge when teaching online safety. It should be taught alongside healthy relationships and issues of consent. Emotional health needs drive some teens to overshare, posting images of all types as they seek to be liked, admired or to escape from loneliness. Others tend to take risks online. Sadly, for both, oversharing and signs of neediness are quickly exploited by others.

A warning signal of high-risk online lives

Sharing self-generated explicit images, videos or live streams may be a signal that a young person is also at risk of harm in other ways. Those who have ever shared their image (sharers) describe a range of other online behaviours and experiences of online aggression which suggests that they were also exposed to further potential harm, both online and offline. These include having images shared in revenge, being solicited by someone who is not who they say they are, someone 'stalking or controlling' them, or someone trying to persuade them into unwanted sexual activity and meeting up face to face with someone they met online. Compared to teens who don't share nudes, sharers are more likely to visit

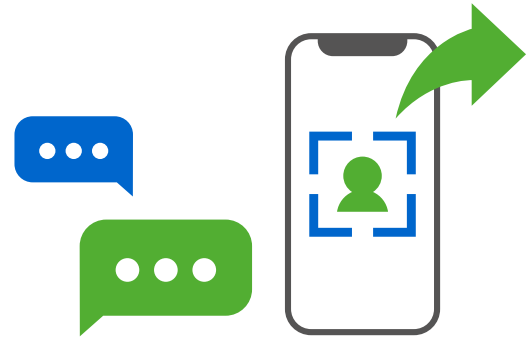
dating and gambling sites or talk to people in chat rooms. They also experience more cyber aggression, inhabiting a high risk and often threatening online world. However, all this takes place against a backdrop in which the majority of young people who have shared one or more images, claim to have suffered no direct harm from sharing the nude image itself. They appear to trust that their image(s) have not been distorted without their knowledge, despite evidence from the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) that images are frequently misused.

Not all teens are sharing nudes

Despite what adults believe, young people in this anonymous survey told us that sharing nudes is not 'endemic.'¹ It is most prevalent among those aged 15 and over, 17% of whom said they had shared a nude or sexual photo of themselves. But this is far from the whole picture because sharing nudes is far more prevalent among certain groups of already vulnerable young people. More than 1 in 5 of those with an eating disorder and more than 1 in 4 of those in care are sharing these images. Young carers, those who worry about life at home and teens with speech difficulties or hearing loss, all report more sharing of nudes than teens without vulnerabilities. They experience numerous online threats and risks because of their need to belong and connect to others which appears to be exploited.

Because children in the vulnerable groups are often known to services or receiving support, agencies may see a disproportionately high number of cases, leading to the impression that all teens are sharing sexual images. The survey findings suggest that there is a risk that this might hide the fact that 'sexting' is so serious for vulnerable teens because it is not as common among the wider teenage population.

¹Natasha Bijlani BBC 11th May 2015, 'Sexting' teenagers risk depression, says psychiatrist'



Parents and Teens – a different perspective

A disconnect is perceived between adults' view of and advice on 'sexting' and young people's view of 'sharing nudes.' As over 3/4 of teens who have shared images say 'nothing bad happened' afterwards, they might disregard adult online safety advice as it does not align with their experience. Nor does it acknowledge their most common motive for sharing: 'I was in a relationship and I wanted to.' Exploring healthy relationships and consent, rather than responding punitively when young people are found to have shared self-generated images, may be a pathway to helping them. For example, 1/3 of boys held the view that sharing nudes 'was expected in a relationship.' This view could be challenged. In addition, the disinhibition experienced behind a screen could be a subject for debate with young people.

It's not talked about

Online safety advice from parents/ carers and schools is missed or lacking for sharers and their compliance with that advice, if given, is low. Only 39% of sharers learned to stay safe online from their parents or carers, in contrast to more than half of the non-sharers, 58%.

Compared to their peers who did not share nudes, the sharers are:

- Less likely to say they learned about online safety at school: 2/3 of sharers learned in school, in contrast to 81% of non-sharers. Significantly, 14% of sharers said they had never been taught about this.
- Less likely to say they follow the online safety advice they were given. Less than one third do so: 31%, compared to 53% of those who do not share nudes.

Key Points

Sexting has long been said to be 'endemic' among teens. However, the picture from those aged over 13 in The Cybersurvey is more nuanced:

- Sexting is not widespread among all teens but is worryingly prevalent among those who are already vulnerable offline in other ways. They find themselves in high risk situations facing an array of scenarios and potentially harmful encounters which make their online lives a safeguarding concern, and potentially an amplifier or trigger for their mental health difficulties. Sharers are more likely than teens who do not share nudes to have looked at content talking about self-harm or suicide.
- Among those who shared nudes, 18% were pressured or blackmailed into it.
- Vulnerable young people are far more likely to be pressured or blackmailed to share nudes, often with distressing consequences such as being threatened if they don't send further images, or

having their image shared in revenge by a former partner or friend when a relationship breaks up. They are also often bullied or harassed because of the image as others get to see it. Their eagerness to be accepted is exploited by others as they overshare frequently, looking for affirmation or affection. This is noticed by others who exploit it.

- In stark contrast, there are young people who share nudes because they want to within a relationship, do it for fun, or because they thought they looked good. The majority say that nothing bad happened as a result. Some insist they are still happily in this long-term relationship. This renders rules about online safety meaningless in their eyes and they go on to ignore many of them, living as they do in a sexualised world.
- The Cybersurvey found that less than 1/3 of those who share nudes follow the online safety advice they were taught, while 14% say they did not receive it. Effective online safety advice needs to be delivered alongside sensitive relationships education as a life skill.

About The Cybersurvey

The annual Cybersurvey by Youthworks explores the rapidly changing lives of young people in the digital environment; tracking trends, advantages and emerging concerns. Data is collected from 11-16 year olds in schools, colleges and alternative provision every autumn. A small number of 17 year olds also participated. A youth participation model helps shape the questionnaire and schools are encouraged to debate the results with young people. Local authorities and children's services use the data to target their efforts and evaluate their services.

14,944 young people took part in the survey during 2019. Of these, 6,045 respondents aged 13 and over answered questions on relationships, meetups and sexting. A limitation is that the sample omits those not in education. In common with all earlier samples of The Cybersurvey, there are more respondents aged

11-13 than 13-16 and over, due to the year groups schools choose to include. However, this large sample provides unique insights for services and policy makers where the focus is on early prevention and support and for those concerned with younger teens becoming caught up in digital relationship problems. The focus on vulnerable groups will be of use to planners and services.

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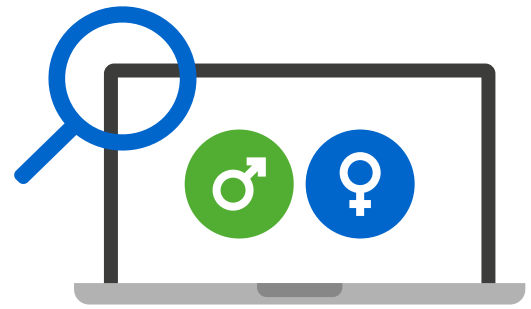
Methodology and safeguarding

The survey questionnaire and associated procedures received a favourable ethical opinion from Kingston University. Schools are invited to take part and given instructions on safeguarding arrangements, privacy and unique codes. Responses are anonymous. School level data is not shared publicly. Young people are given information about the anonymous survey and its purpose in advance. They understand that taking part is entirely voluntary, that their answers will help others and that while we would like all questions to be answered, they can opt out if they wish. They are told how they can find out about the results and thanked. Helplines are provided at the end of the survey.

Declaration:

This dissemination report commissioned by Internet Matters, forms part of a research programme/project in which the authors (Adrienne Katz and Dr. Aiman El Asam) are working in partnership with Internet Matters. The project titled "*Vulnerability, Online Lives and Mental Health: Towards a New Practice Model*" has financial support from the e-Nurture Network and UK Research and Innovation (Research Council Grant Ref: ES/S004467/1).





About the sample

This sample of 14,994 collected in 2019 includes respondents with a range of abilities and offline vulnerabilities. Multiple vulnerabilities are present in many individuals concurrently.

Table 1 Shows number and percentage of young people identifying with each of the vulnerable groups.

| Vulnerability in the total sample | | | Among ages 13 and over | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|-------|------------------------|-------|
| I have a long-term physical illness | 2% | 372 | 3% | 173 |
| Care experienced | 2% | 358 | 2% | 137 |
| I have an eating disorder | 3% | 385 | 3% | 195 |
| Hearing loss | 3% | 400 | 3% | 170 |
| I'm a carer for a family member | 4% | 598 | 4% | 242 |
| I have a learning difficulty | 4% | 535 | 7% | 421 |
| I am autistic | 4% | 646 | 6% | 321 |
| I have a mental health difficulty | 8% | 1,207 | 11% | 717 |
| Vision impairment | 8% | 1,146 | 8% | 533 |
| I worry about life at home | 10% | 1,463 | 9% | 582 |
| English is not my first language | 11% | 1,676 | 11% | 716 |
| I have anger issues | 12% | 1,790 | 13% | 797 |
| I have speech difficulties | 10% | 533 | 4% | 250 |
| None of these apply to me | 59% | 9,008 | 57% | 3,623 |

Gender

47% Girls, 47% Boys and 6% those who prefer not to state their gender.

Ages 13 and over

Girls 46%, Boys 47%, 7% prefer not to say or other.

Regions

- South East, Essex and London – 3,189
- East of England – 5,503
- Midlands – 2,645
- North East, Yorkshire and Humber and Scotland – 1,690
- North West and Northern Ireland – 1,583
- South West – 1,482

16,092 responses were received. After cleaning 14,994 were used.

Age groups

- 11 years – 3,325
- 12 years – 3,431
- 13 years – 2,898
- 14 years – 1,664
- 15 years – 1,154
- 16 years – 330
- 17 years – 284

Not every respondent gave their age. Young people aged 15 and over are grouped together throughout this report

Table 2 shows the percentage and the absolute numbers of young people (aged 13 and over) in each vulnerable group who shared nudes.*

| I've shared nudes | n | Mental health difficulty | Worry about life | I am autistic | Learning difficulty | Hearing loss | Young carer | Care experienced | Eating disorder | Speech difficulties | English not 1st language | Vision impaired | Anger issues | Long standing illness | None of these |
|-------------------|----|--------------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| | | % | 12 | 14 | 16 | 13 | 15 | 16 | 26 | 23 | 16 | 12 | 12 | 14 | 20 |
| | 82 | 75 | 47 | 51 | 25 | 36 | 34 | 41 | 37 | 77 | 60 | 103 | 31 | 201 | |

*Those aged 13 and over answered questions on relationships, sharing nudes and meetups. n = 6,045

Introduction: Fun and flirting, or coercion and blackmail



'I feel that people judge me like when I post pictures of myself because they say I look good and cute, but I feel the total opposite.'

Girl, 12

Young people in a sexualised world

Teenagers are presented with a sexualised world on TV and throughout traditional and social media and then told not to share their own nude or explicit images. What young people see on their screens and experience in their lives or the lives of their classmates is that sexual images are everywhere, and teens know through their own experience that nothing bad happens to the majority of those who share. It should be no surprise then, that simply telling young people not to do it, does not work. Issues around sexual imagery and relationships are always complex, and we fail our young people if we only give them rules to follow, which too many clearly regard as meaningless. The goal should be to make relationships education relevant and meaningful and incorporate online safety into all life skills discussions.

Yet there are very genuine dangers from which the young should be protected. It is the most vulnerable young people who are more likely to share nudes. They also encounter wide ranging related risks. This is all the more urgent against a backdrop of increased criminal activity in recent months: The Internet Watch Foundation reveals that there were almost 9 million attempts to access images or videos of child abuse in April 2020 in the UK.²

Emotional health needs drive some teenagers to post a great many images of all types online as they seek validation or acceptance. Others take risks in many of their online interactions. Unfortunately, oversharing and signs of neediness are often quickly exploited by others. Young people will continue to come to harm if

we do not support them in new ways involving them in a dialogue they can respect. During the COVID-19 lockdown young people were online more than ever before, isolated and often not seen by those who would safeguard them. The issues raised in this report will apply in normal times, but the issue is urgent - never more so than now.

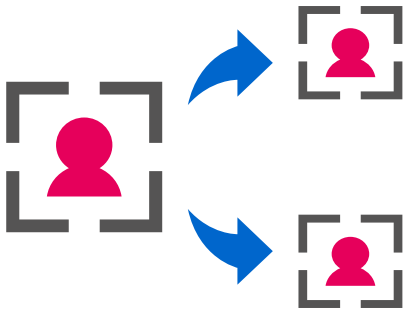
Looking for love and looking good

Adults talk about 'sexting' and believe it is 'endemic'.³ This often-repeated phrase suggests that it is so widespread that nothing can be done about it. It gives young people a message that 'everyone is doing it'. Online safety education, designed and delivered by adults, delivers dire warnings not to do this. Teens on the other hand, talk about 'sharing nudes' and over 1/3 of boys say it is 'expected' in a relationship. Of girls who shared, 41% did so because they were in a relationship and wanted to. Common reasons for sharing nudes are 'for fun' or 'because I thought I looked good.'

This is clearly uncomfortable reading for many parents. However, the reality is young people admire media stars and follow influencers who pose, sing or dance provocatively and some want to do the same. In a sexualised environment with such emphasis on appearance, advice that ignores how good it is to feel young and attractive will not land. Young people receive mixed messages. Their parents, and perhaps they too watch Love Island, or Too Hot to Handle or Sex Education on mainstream TV and streaming channels and are led to believe that in this body beautiful obsessed world, what they look like and what they wear to pose in, is a critical and integral part of their personality. What you post is who you are.

²Internet Watch Foundation 20th May 2020 News release.

³Leamouth, A, 6th February 2018. MSPs Debate the Endemic Issue of Teenage Sexting As Concerns Grow. The National, Scotland.



This leads to online safety advice being disregarded

Adult advice simply does not resonate with teenagers; whether about dire consequences if they do share, or because this advice does not acknowledge their reality. For over 3/4 who shared nudes, nothing bad happened. Those in long-term trusting relationships cannot see what the fuss is about. This can lead them to lose trust in the advice and then disregard other online safety information i.e. 48% of boys and 43% of girls have added people as friends without knowing who they are. Parents or older siblings might be looking at dating sites and chatting to people they don't know. In these ways, the credibility and trust needed for safety education to result in behaviour change is undermined.

A new curriculum might offer a new opportunity

The failure to deliver realistic and meaningful relationships education in ways that resonate with teenagers, could potentially be remedied using the 2020 curriculum on Relationships and Sex Education which is statutory in England. It cannot come soon enough. However, one method of delivery will not meet the needs of all young people. Anyone who is vulnerable offline may be at greater risk online than others. Those with additional learning needs require tailored support to stay safe online, while those with emotional health needs might be at risk online for different reasons. This will require training for staff

and sensitive delivery. Research has shown that if teens encounter one risk type, their chances of harm increase due to relationships found between these risk types.⁴ Teachers will require a broader understanding of online harms.

The risks and harms are genuine and serious

Sharing sexualised images does create a considerable risk of harm. Images are often shared in good faith but then re-shared as a status signifier among boys⁵ or 'harvested' and misused by bad actors online without the creator knowing. Grooming is an ever present possibility, and some young people are extremely susceptible to persuasion, yet the NSPCC found that less than half of children aged 12 to 15 know how to change their settings to control who can view their social media.⁶

Almost one in five of the young people in The Cybersurvey who shared a nude were either blackmailed to send more photos, bullied or harassed because of their photo, or found that the photo was re-shared without their consent. Live streaming is becoming more common among all young people, including primary school children with attendant risks. Internet Matters reports that over a quarter of children aged 6-10, and around a third of tweens aged 11-13, regularly or sometimes livestream.⁷ This can lead to harm. 1 in 10 children on video chats have been asked to undress say the NSPCC.⁸ Self-generated images are scraped and misused on a massive scale.

⁴El Asam, A. and Katz, A. (2018). *Vulnerable Young People and Their Experience of Online Risks*, *Human-Computer Interaction*, 33, 281-304. DOI: 10.1080/07370024.2018.1437544

⁵Ringrose, J., Gill R., Livingstone S. & Harvey L., A. (2012). *Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and 'Sexting': A Report Prepared for the NSPCC*. London, UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/pre-2013/qualitative-study-sexting/>

⁶NSPCC, 2019, *How Safe Are Our Children*

⁷Internet Matters 2018. *All the world's a stage*.

⁸NSPCC October 2018, *Wild West Web, Livestreaming and video-chat risks*.

About a third of all known child sexual abuse material the Internet Watch Foundation finds on the internet has been posted by children after they have been groomed and coerced into making and sharing explicit images or videos of themselves. More than 3/4 of this “self-generated” material features 11 to 13-year-old children, the majority of whom are girls⁹.

Images can also be shared in an act of revenge or anger after a relationship is over. The loss of control over the image and the way it is misused is devastating to young people and can leave lasting emotional impacts. Images can be photoshopped or otherwise altered and these fakes distributed to people known to the subject or used in wider ways in the online world. The National Crime Agency believes there are a minimum 300,000 individuals in the UK posing a sexual threat to children, either through physical ‘contact’ abuse or online. This announcement in April 2020 is based on their collation of several sources of information. NCA investigators were able

to find Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) content on the open web in just three clicks. They warn that during the COVID-19 lockdown they are aware from online chat that people plan to take advantage of children who are now connected online as never before.¹⁰

Good advice should not increase fears

Finding a sensitive and supportive way to discuss this with young people is the goal. These insights from The Cybersurvey may provide pointers to discussions and interventions which consider: the meaning of consent and respect for both parties in a relationship. But also, how images have a value to the sender and a quite different value in the hands of someone else. Online safety advice must tread lightly to find a balance between being effective or terrifying young people. At this young age, many have fears often fed by ‘safety advice’:



(I worry) ‘That people are going to send me a nude when I never wanted them to.’

Girl, 12



(I worry about) ‘Adults trying to befriend me and hurt me.’

Girl, 12



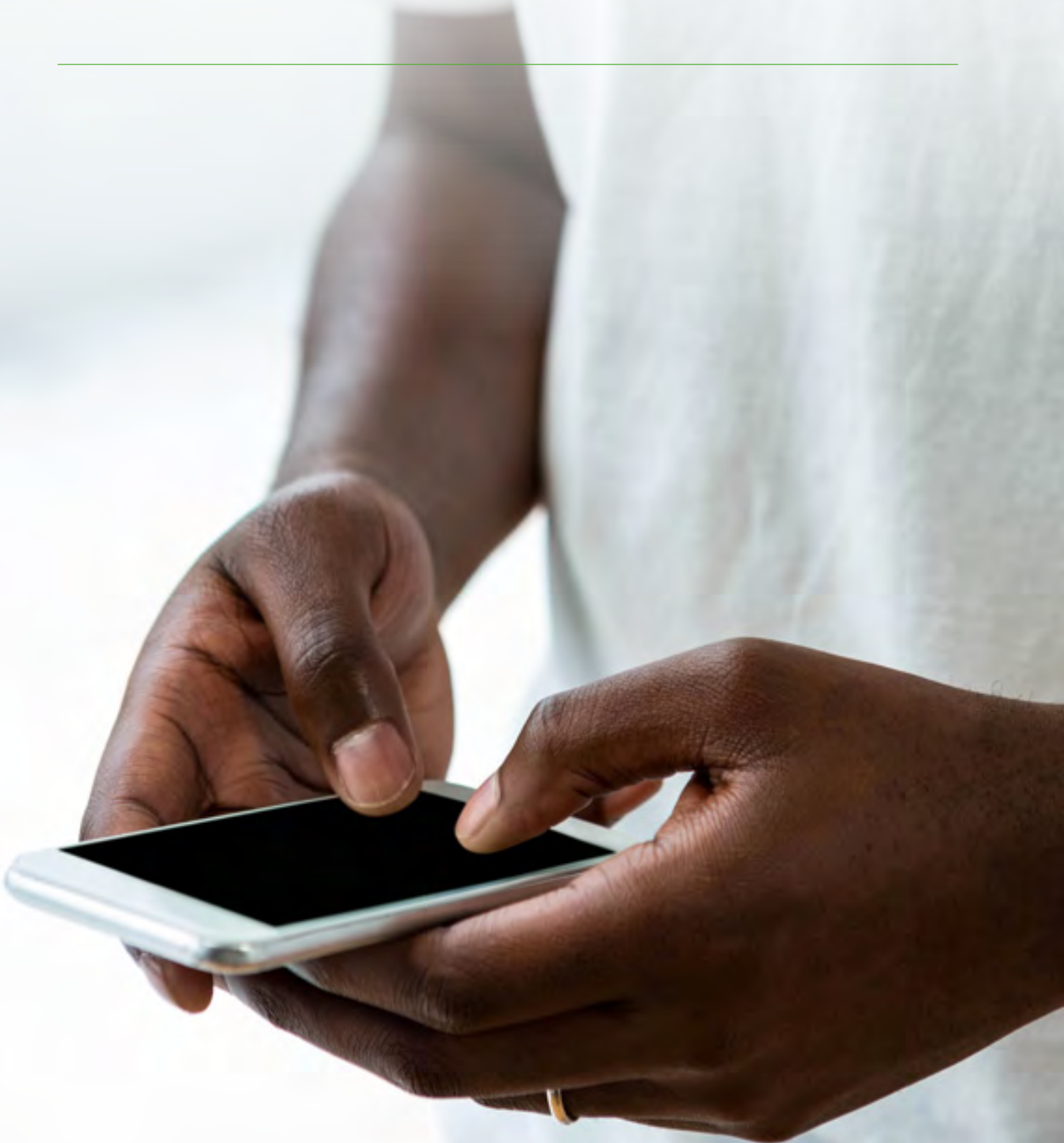
(I worry) ‘That someone is going to find out where I live and kill my family and it would be all my fault.’

Boy, 11

⁹Internet Watch Foundation www.iwf.org.uk

¹⁰NCA April 4th 2020 News release: Law enforcement in coronavirus online safety push as National Crime Agency reveals 300,000 in UK pose sexual threat to children

How relationships change in the digital world



'I act different and make myself look weird but when I'm in real person I'm very shy and nervous about things.'

Girl, 11

'I feel way more confident when I'm behind a screen but maybe I can be a bit too confident.'

Girl, 11

Screens encourage disinhibition

The disinhibition experienced behind a screen can lead people to behave in ways they would be unlikely to do face to face.¹¹

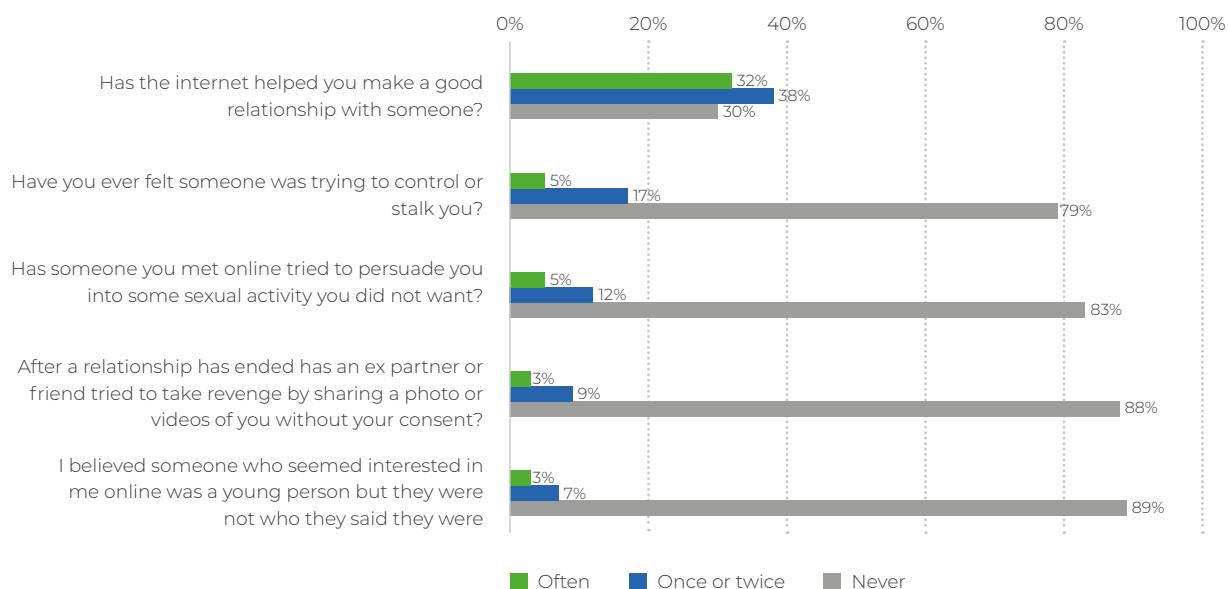
Below young people describe how the internet affects their relationships. While they overwhelmingly say it helped them to make a good relationship, it was also

a channel for cruel, coercive or harmful behaviour in relationships, experienced by a few.

There are new risks in digital relationships which young people have to learn to navigate, from digital stalking to online coercion, revenge sharing of photos and fake solicitation. Nevertheless, despite these challenges seen in Chart 1. 70% of teens feel that *'the internet has helped me make a good relationship with someone'*.

Chart 1. Relationships in a digital world

Respondents 13 and over



Online relationships and Isolation

Young people are not widely using dating sites, visiting chat rooms, or seeking new friends online. The majority tend to talk to people they know, friends of friends, or those with whom they game. However, the need to seek out 'new friends' by going onto dating sites, or visiting chatrooms is much greater

for teens with eating disorders; the care experienced teens, those with a long-standing physical illness and young carers. Isolation appears to be a key driver of online behaviour and risk taking.

Pages with adult content are also visited more often by young people with hearing loss, eating disorders, experience of care and those with a long-standing physical illness.

¹¹Suler, J. (2004). *The Online Disinhibition Effect*. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326

Who shares nudes?

At age 15 and over, 17% of teens are sharing explicit images, videos, or livestreaming. This accelerates quickly in the mid-teens, from 4% at age 13, to 7% at age 14. The rate then more than doubles between ages 14 and the 15 and over age group, when around 1 in 6 have sent an image of themselves to someone else.

All respondents aged 13 and over were asked the questions about sharing nudes. Those aged 11-12 were routed differently in the questionnaire. While the percentage of each age group who shared images seem low, this belies the complexity of this issue.

There is little difference between boys and girls. But teens who prefer not to state their gender are an exception, being more than 2x as likely to say they have shared nudes. Older age groups are naturally more likely to be sharing images than younger ones, yet it could be far more serious for a 13 year old to be doing so, especially if coerced. Furthermore, those who are vulnerable offline are far more likely to be sharing nudes than their non-vulnerable counterparts.

Table 3 Who shares nudes? By age group

| Age | Number answering | Has shared nudes | % of age group |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| 13 | 2,767 | 111 | 4% |
| 14 | 1,588 | 113 | 7% |
| 15 and over | 1,681 | 217 | 17% |
| | 6,036 valid responses | 441 valid responses | |

Table 4 Multiple vulnerabilities increase the likelihood of sexting

| Number of vulnerabilities present | % sexting I have done this | Number who sexted | % who have never done this | Number who never sexted | Total in this group |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1-2 vulnerabilities | 8% | 175 | 92% | 1995 | 2170 |
| 3-4 vulnerabilities | 14% | 56 | 86% | 333 | 389 |
| 5 or more vulnerabilities | 26% | 32 | 74% | 90 | 122 |

'I sit about my bedroom and worry about life and my 'gender misinterpretation problems... I basically worry that I don't like being a girl but I'm not sure if I want to be a boy either.'

'Queer', 11

'My online life helps me connect with other people who face similar problems with gender identity.'

I identify as non-binary, 14

Chart 2. Sexting: I have done this.

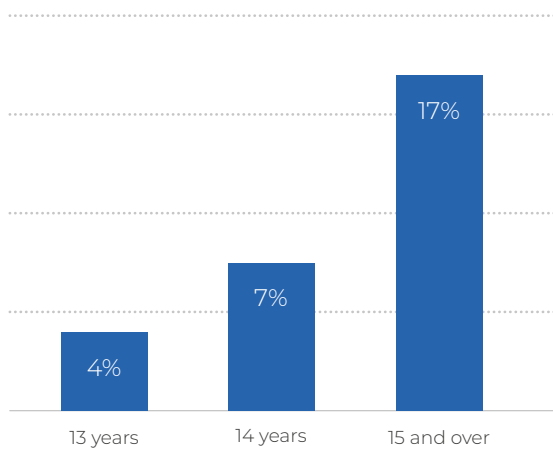
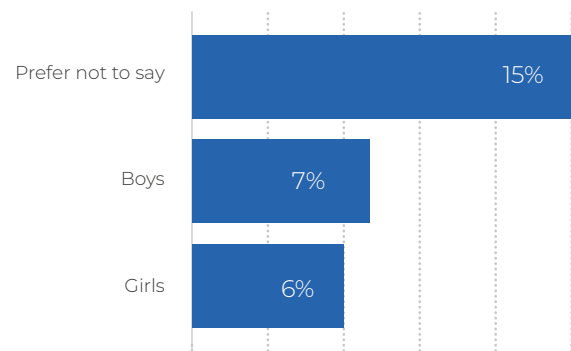


Chart 3. Sharing nudes.



Those who prefer not to state their gender are more likely to be sharing images

Gender identity: turning to the internet to find 'others like me'

Teens who are questioning or worried about their gender appear to be actively sharing images, perhaps in an experimental way, but also describe their search to *'find and talk to people like me'*.

This cohort of young people need help to be safe, so it is concerning that their answers on parental advice indicate that their parents are not talking to them about their online life as much as they could. Only 54% of young people who prefer not to state their gender said they had learned about online safety from their parents, compared to 57% of boys and 67% of girls. Only 57% said they could turn to their parents or carers if they had a problem online, compared to over two thirds of girls (68%) and 64% of boys.

They may be depressed, anxious or feel empowered to be talking to people who understand them.

Offline vulnerability and image sharing

Young people aged 13 and over with the difficulties illustrated in Chart 4 are more likely to be sharing images than their peers who do not face these adversities. More than 1 in 4 (26%) of those in care, and more than 1 in 5 of those with an eating disorder (29%) report sharing images. Through wanting to be loved and pressure to share, as well as learning difficulties and emotional health vulnerability, they are more likely to engage in sexting than other teenagers.

While some did it willingly or for fun, there are those who had been pressured or blackmailed into it: 59% of those with hearing loss; more than half of teens with a speech difficulty; almost half of young carers; 46% of those with an eating disorder.

All young people who were already vulnerable reported higher levels of pressure and blackmail than those with none of these adversities (16%). Numbers are small but the message is consistent. (See table 5 p 19.)

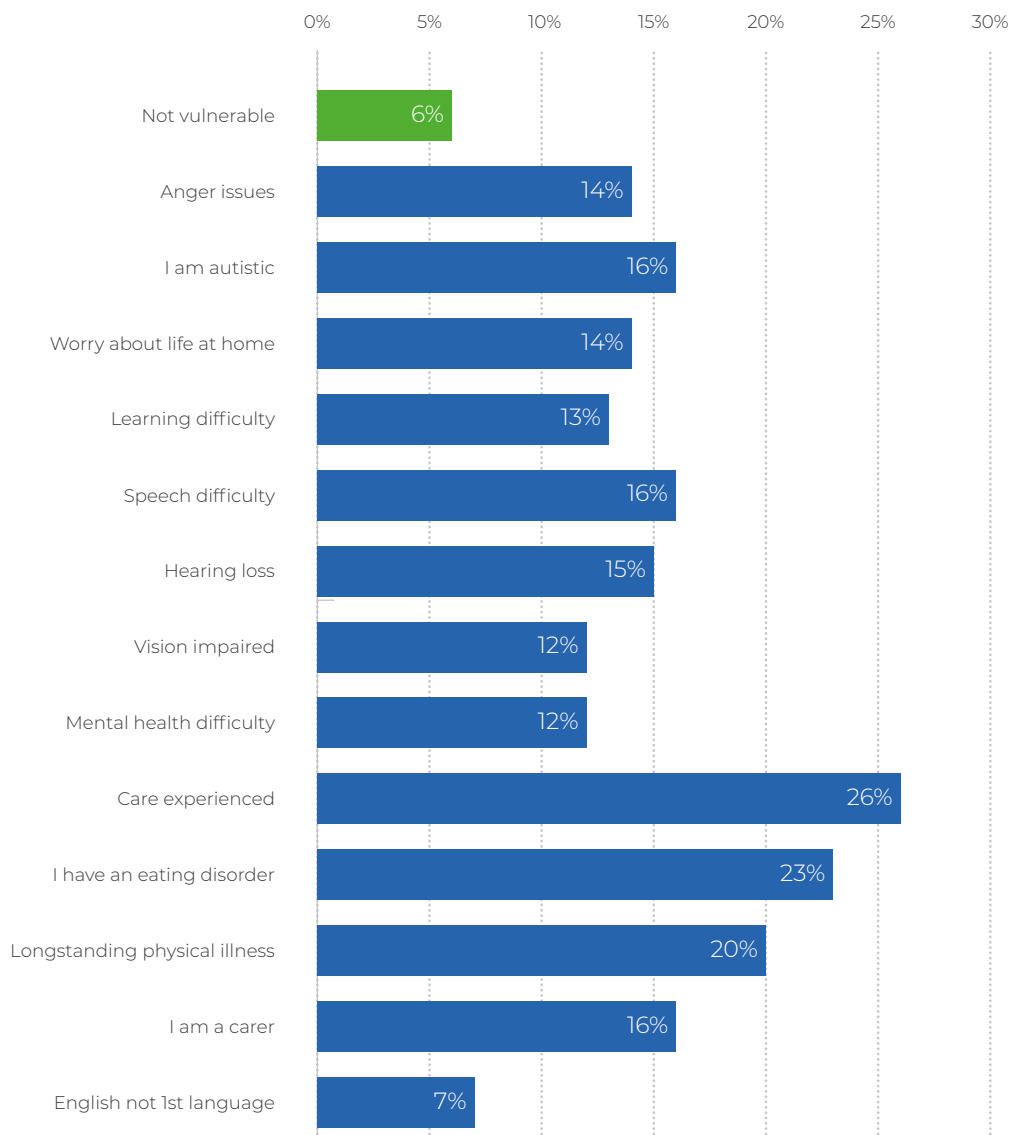
'I feel I can be who or whatever I want online.'

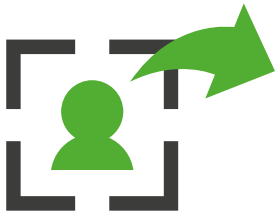
Transgender, 16

'I can be more myself online whereas in person I feel pressured to be what everyone wants me to be.'

Girl, 13

Chart 4. Sexting: I have done this.





Compared to young people with no offline vulnerabilities, those with the following difficulties are more likely to be sharing nudes:

I am in or leaving care – more than 4x as likely

I have an eating disorder – almost 4x as likely

I have a longstanding physical illness – more than 3x as likely

I have a mental health difficulty – 2x as likely

I worry about life at home – more than 2x as likely

I have hearing loss – more than 2x as likely

I am a young carer – more than 2x as likely

I have a speech difficulty – more than 2x as likely

The complex desire to be accepted

Young people with speech difficulties illustrate the desire to be accepted. They give ambivalent answers – 61% of those who shared images say they were in a relationship and wanted to share, whilst half said they were pressured or blackmailed into it. Nearly half (45%) say they were in a relationship and felt it was 'expected' which is a form of pressure.

A picture of multiple reasons and pressures emerges. Young people want to please a partner, want acceptance, and may feel pressured. And, while they may initially share willingly, they might later feel they only shared under pressure.

Teens with eating disorders: oversharing, seeking new 'friends' and information that could be harmful

Sending nudes is one form of over-sharing in this image-conscious world. It is of note that teens with eating disorders are active sharers in other ways: they are most active posting photos or videos, sharing 'what I'm doing' and going online to 'find new friends'. In contrast, non-vulnerable teens are least likely to report these amongst their top 5 favourite online activities.

Young people with an eating disorder are in need of targeted digital safeguarding interventions as they overshare, seek new friends, visit dating sites, look at content intended for adults and are the most active group posting all types of photos and videos. (Teens who are sexting describe their favourite online activities in Chart 17 on page 47.)

Unsurprisingly, 31% of those with an eating disorder say they 'often' encounter content that encourages anorexia. They are more likely than all other vulnerable groups to say they have shared nudes (26%) and nearly half (46%) report experiencing pressure or blackmail as the reason they shared.

As few as 6% of teens with no offline vulnerabilities rely on dating sites, in contrast to 20% of those with an eating disorder, 19% of those with a longstanding physical illness and young carers; 18% of young people in care, and 16% of those with hearing loss.



A continuum of harm is possible

Sexting under duress may precede other harms which is why it is vital to intervene early.¹² These findings from The Cybersurvey should be considered against the backdrop of some messages from research for the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA):

Research for IICSA draws attention to the extent of abuse suffered by three very vulnerable groups: those with special educational needs, those who are disabled and those with a learning difficulty.

Special educational needs residential schools recorded nearly 10 times the number of safeguarding concerns relating to sexual abuse per student than mainstream residential schools.¹³ A meta-analysis on the risk of violence (including sexual violence) towards disabled children from 1990 and 2010 identified that children with

learning disabilities experienced a greater risk of abuse than children with other disabilities. A literature review of research, published by the Inquiry in 2018, reported that disabled children are around three times more likely to be sexually abused than non-disabled children.¹⁴ The authors also found a consensus that disabled children are at a greater risk of sexual abuse than their non-disabled peers, and most estimates put this increased risk at around three times that of non-disabled. The review also shows that both bullying and sexual harassment can create environments within schools that are conducive to the growth of peer on peer abuse (Firmin and Curtis, 2015¹⁵ Ringrose et al, 2011¹⁶).

Teenagers' needs, emotions and support networks vary considerably, and it is to be expected that the online space provide ways for them to explore their developing identity. They need help to do this in safe ways.

Table 5 shows the percentage and the absolute numbers of young people (aged 13 and over) in each vulnerable group who shared nudes, and of those, who were pressured or blackmailed to do this.*

| | | Mental health difficulty | Worry about life | I am autistic | Learning difficulty | Hearing loss | Young carer | Care experienced | Eating disorder | Speech difficulties | English not 1st language | Vision impaired | Anger issues | Long standing illness | None of these |
|--|---|--------------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| I've shared nudes | % | 12 | 14 | 16 | 13 | 15 | 16 | 26 | 23 | 16 | 12 | 12 | 14 | 20 | 6 |
| | n | 82 | 75 | 47 | 51 | 25 | 36 | 34 | 41 | 37 | 77 | 60 | 103 | 31 | 201 |
| I was pressured or blackmailed into doing it | % | 28 | 30 | 43 | 40 | 59 | 49 | 38 | 46 | 53 | 28 | 41 | 23 | 39 | 16 |
| | n | 24 | 23 | 20 | 22 | 13 | 16 | 12 | 19 | 19 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 12 | 33 |

*Those aged 13 and over answered questions on relationships, sharing nudes and meetups. n=6045

¹²May-Chahal, C., Palmer, E., Dodds, S., & Milan, S. (2018). *Rapid Evidence Assessment: Characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation*. Lancaster: Lancaster University.

¹³Roberts, E, Sharrock, S Yeo, A. Graham, J. Turley C. and Kelley. N. (2020). *Safeguarding Children in Residential Special Schools*, Commissioned and undertaken on behalf of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

¹⁴Ward, M. and Rodger, H. (2018). *Child Sexual Abuse in Residential Schools*. Commissioned and undertaken on behalf of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

¹⁵Firmin, C. and Curtis, G. (2015). *Practitioner Briefing #1: What is Peer-on-peer Abuse?* London: MsUnderstood Partnership.

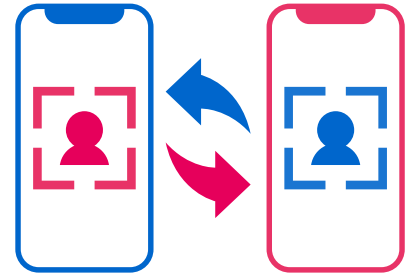
¹⁶Ringrose, Jessica, Gill, Rosalind, Livingstone, Sonia and Harvey, Laura (2012). *A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': a report prepared for the NSPCC. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, London, UK. C*

Why did they share nudes?



'She asked me to, we traded nudes.'

Boy, 14

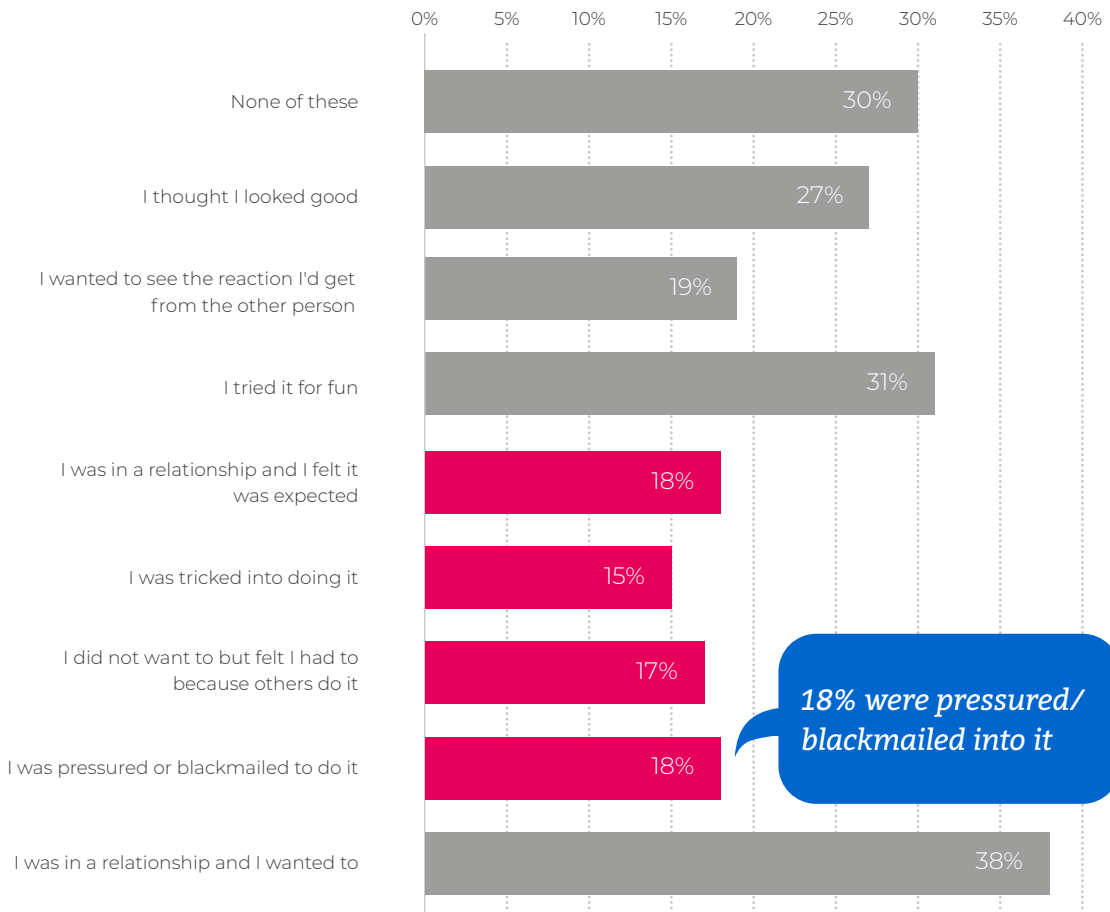


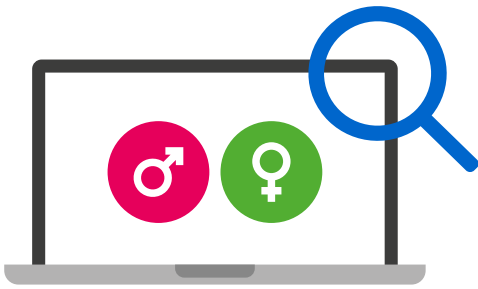
We wanted to understand why teenagers were sharing: of those who shared a nude or explicit photo video or live stream, 38% were in a relationship and wanted to do so. Nearly a third, 31%, just tried it for fun. However, worryingly, 18% were pressured or blackmailed to do so.

A significant minority, 30% said they did it for other reasons than those listed.

Chart 5. If you have shared a nude or sexual photo, was it because...?

By all aged 13 and over who shared a nude



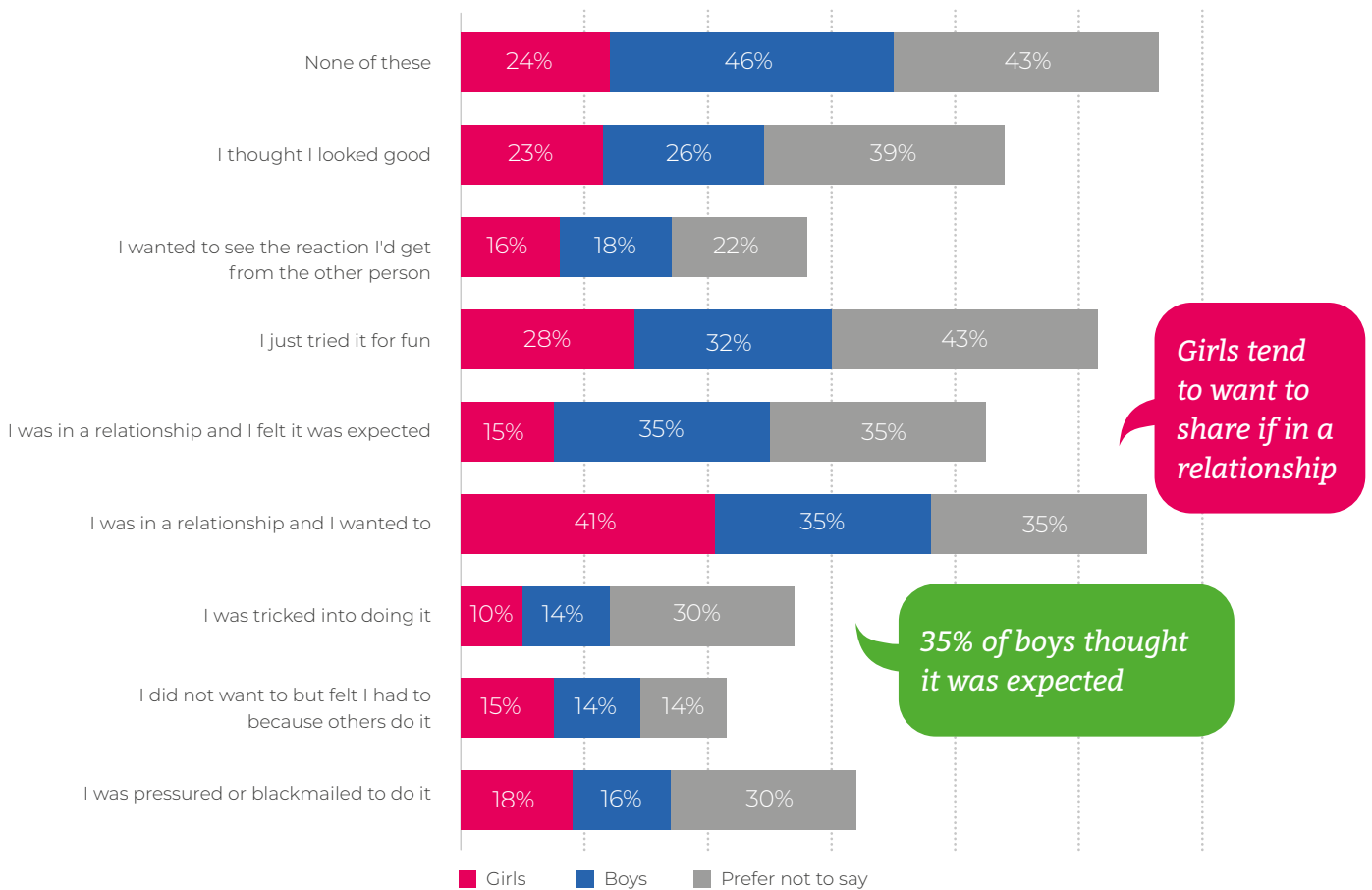


Does gender play a part in the reasons given for sharing?

Those who prefer not to state their gender are twice as likely to suffer pressure and blackmail compared to boys, 30% say they were ‘tricked’ into sharing an image. Just under half of those not stating a gender, 43%, tried it for fun. Over a third 35% of boys expected to share images within a relationship and 41% of girls said: ‘I was in a relationship and wanted to do so.’

Chart 6. Sexting: If you shared nude or sexual images, was it because...?

By gender, all respondents age 13 and over who shared nudes





The underlying issue of emotional health



'It (being on my phone) makes me feel wanted.'

Boy, 14

'I feel online I can escape my worries and problems.'

Prefer not to state gender, 14

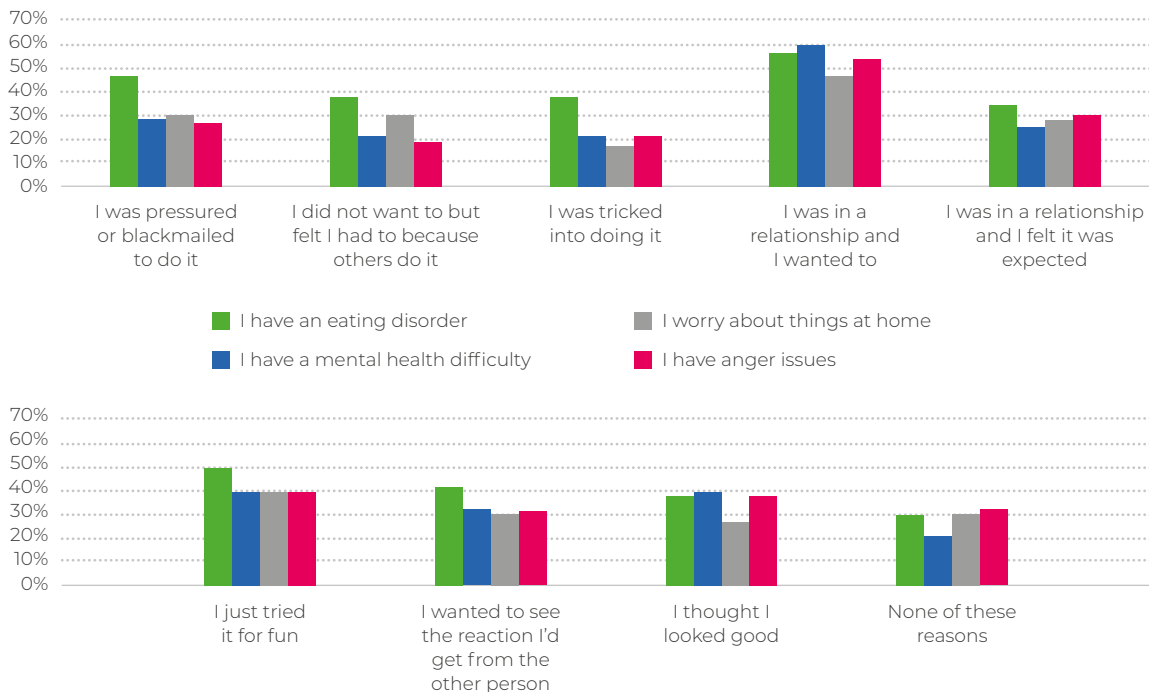
Emotional health is a key reason why some teens share nudes more readily than others.

Teens who are already vulnerable offline, give similar reasons to those given by all teens. However, a higher proportion suffered coercion or felt they had to do it or 'wanted to share' in what they viewed as a romantic relationship. Over half of those with a mental health difficulty (59%) and those with an eating disorder (56%)

said they were in a relationship and wanted to share. While 46% and 28% respectively were blackmailed or pressured into it (see Chart 7 below). This illustrates the importance of considering emotional health as a motivation or an underlying need often exploited by others who see the eagerness for acceptance in the individual. Their reliance on their smartphones in the remarks above hints at how they feel.

Chart 7. If you shared nude or sexual images, was it because...?

By those with emotional health concerns



30% of those who worry about things at home felt they had to, because others do it

59% of those with a mental health difficulty were in a relationship and wanted to do it

46% of those with an eating disorder were pressured or blackmailed to do it

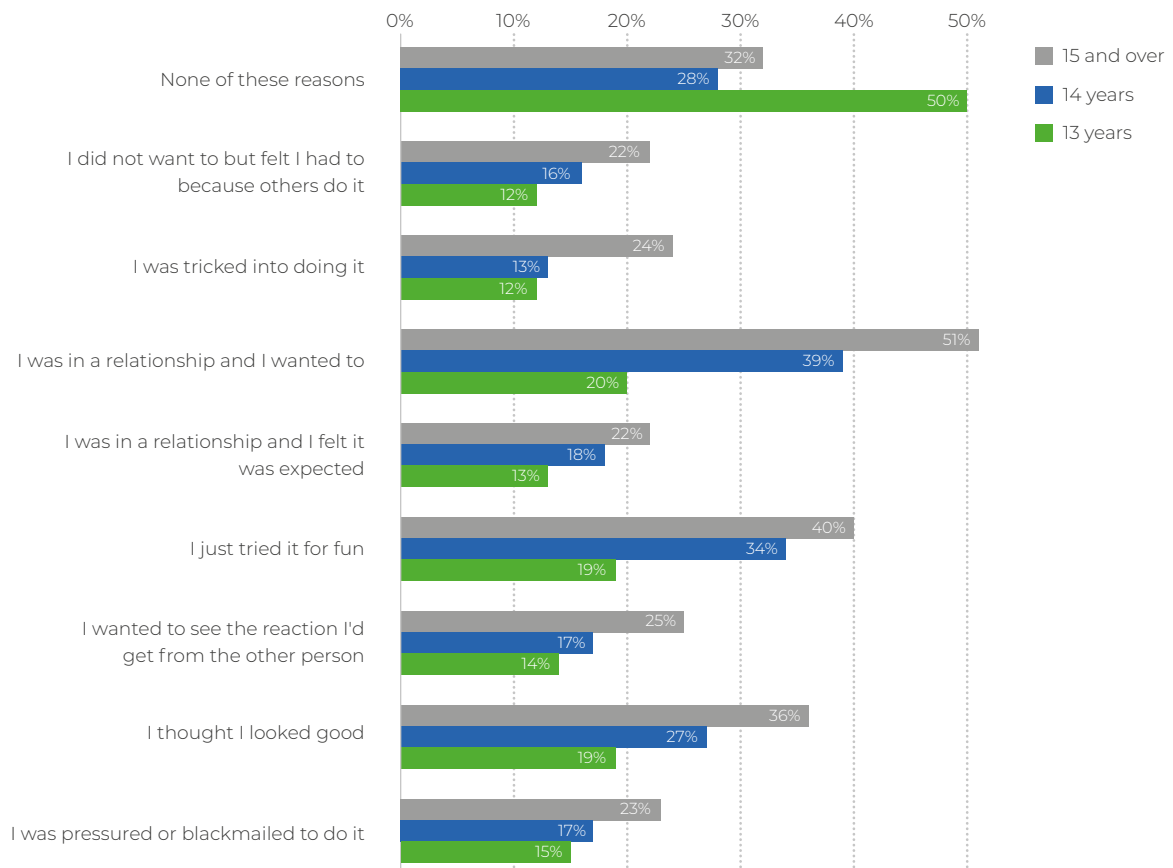
32% with anger issues did it for other unstated reasons

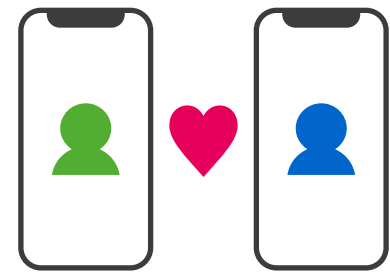
A need to be accepted, admired and loved, coupled with insecurity, exerts a powerful influence on young people who have existing emotional or mental health issues. In hindsight some people have regrets and put it down to pressure from others. While sharing in a relationship was the most common reason given by the total sample of young people who shared, those with a mental

health difficulty are far more likely to say this than other respondents: 59% vs 38% of all those who shared a nude. Being worried about things at home led young people to feel a need to be accepted, or to fit in, for example, 30% felt they had to share simply 'because others do it'. Those with anger issues are least likely to feel they had to comply because it was expected, (27%).

Chart 8. If you shared an image, video or livestream, was it because...?

By age





Reasons for sharing change through the teenage years.

At age 15 and over, being in a relationship and wanting to share, is the dominant reason given. Other popular reasons for this age group are: 'I just tried it for fun' and 'I thought I looked good.' More than one in five aged 15 and over felt it was expected in a relationship. It is worrying that 15% of 13 year olds were coerced into it via pressure or blackmail and a further 12% say they were tricked into it.

Experience and Education: A missed opportunity?

As we have seen, the most common reason for sharing these images is 'I was in a relationship and I wanted to'. Girls are more likely to say this than boys (41% compared to 35%) while more than a third of boys (35%) tend to believe it is something 'expected' in a relationship in contrast to only 15% of girls. This suggests that online safety advice simply telling young people not to do it will not bring the desired change in behaviour. It has not done so until now. Work on respectful relationships might offer a better way of exploring this dynamic. This is an important discussion to share with young people.

Exploring why sharing nudes is 'expected' by boys, after many years of online safety advice, and PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) teaching, might yield insights into how social attitudes override instructions. Could the idea of the distress that might occur if the images are shared without consent or 'scraped' for misuse, contribute to behaviour change? This is unlikely. The majority of young people 78%, stated they did not experience any bad outcome after sharing explicit images. This 'truth' according to their experience, might bring into question any online safety advice and they may disregard other advice on different issues as a result.

The second most common reason given by young people is 'I just tried it for fun' while the third most common reason is 'I thought I looked good', chosen by over a third of those aged 15 and over. All three reasons have in common the expression of natural teenage experiences: risks, relationships, flirting and fun. Their own sense of developing identity and sexuality needs to be recognised within the message.

Then there are teens who chose 'none of these reasons' which include half of the 13 year olds who shared. Young people might be able to shed light on what these other reasons might be, and schools are encouraged to discuss this with students.

From delight to distress

To gain any traction, safety messages should be re-cast to accept that people want to do this and it is fun to look good and be appreciated – however, as long as others can get hold of and misuse these images, sharing might undermine the relationship or ruin it. Images are weaponised in breakups. The heartbreak that follows would certainly override the fun and intimacy. The delight in 'looking good' could be taken away by distress at the thought of who is viewing the material. Therefore, asking your partner to send the image might be described as putting them at risk or not respecting them. New ways of forging a respectful relationship could be explored.

Educational messaging needs to include needs and motivation. The need to be validated and admired online is greater among people who do not receive this at home or offline, leading them to take increasing risks by oversharing intimate images. Are there safer ways they could fulfil this need?

As there were more individuals who shared because they wanted to, and fewer who were pressured, blackmailed or tricked into it, the overall picture shows that young people share out of choice.

At age 13, as many as 1 in 5 of those who shared an image, were in a relationship and wanted to share (20%). This increased to 39% at age 14 and to 51% at age 15 and over. As they grow older, teens are more self-aware, for example, 36% of this older age group shared 'because I thought I looked good.' Others simply wanted to see what reaction they would get or did it 'for fun'.

Vulnerable young people are more likely to be pressured and blackmailed

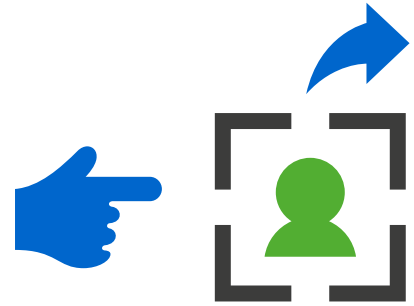
It is not the same for everyone. Despite this picture of sharing voluntarily, very different impacts result if the picture is shared in a trusting relationship or shared under duress. Worryingly, as many as 15% of 13 year olds and 17% of 14 year olds joined older teens in revealing that too many are pressured or even blackmailed into sharing the image. Among those aged 15 and over, 23% said this had happened to them. However, some pressure is subtle and unseen: 18% of young people simply felt that because they were in a relationship 'it was expected', whilst 15% of those aged 15 and over said they felt they had to do it 'because others do it'.





Sharing under pressure





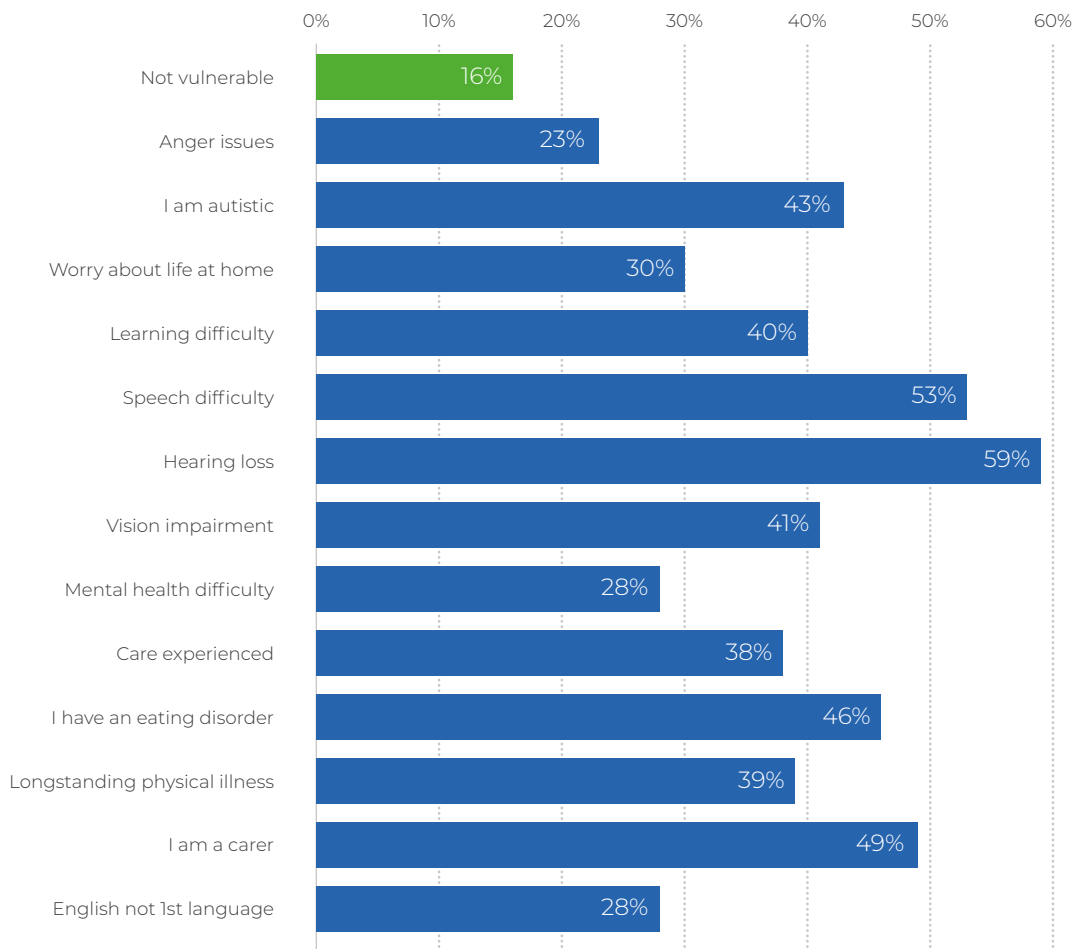
Teens within each vulnerable group, who shared a nude, a video or a livestream were far more likely than non-vulnerable teenagers to have taken this action due to pressure or blackmail.

These answers demonstrate the extent to which teens who are already vulnerable, are targeted or manipulated. Their answers differ markedly from non-

vulnerable sharers, only 6% of whom gave pressure or blackmail as the reason they shared a nude image. Blackmailing a young person under the age of 18 to share explicit or revealing images is illegal. The Cybersurvey has highlighted in more than one annual survey that those with hearing impairments or speech difficulties suffer the most.

Chart 9. I was pressured or blackmailed into it.

By vulnerable group



Note: Whilst some of these groups have small numbers, the overall picture is consistent.

What happened after the images were shared?

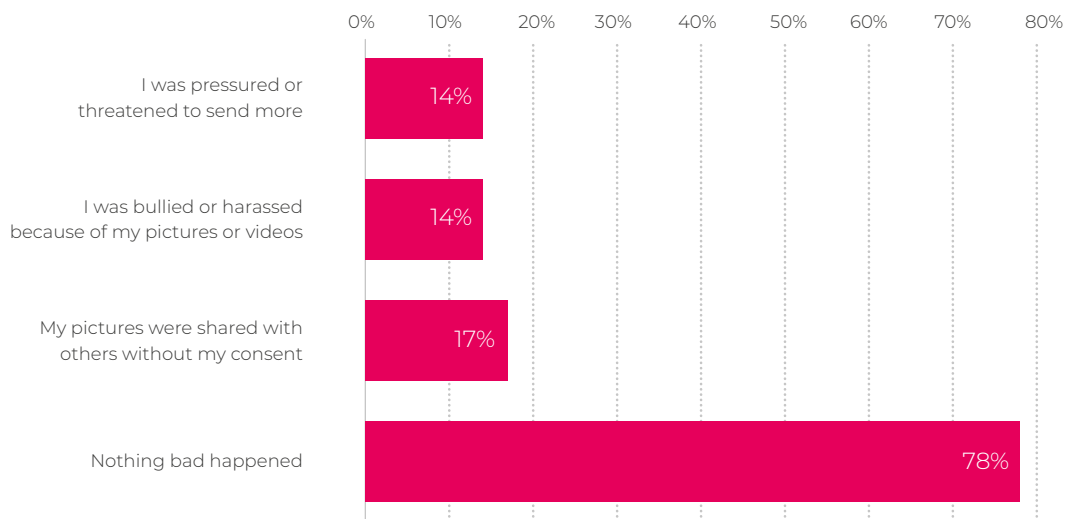


'It was just a joke with the boys'

Boy, 16 (nothing bad happened after the photos were shared.)

Chart 10. What happened after you shared this photo?

By all respondents who shared



Consequences

The fact that nothing bad happened for over three quarters of teens who shared, may reflect how young people's views on sharing nudes and the attitudes towards this behaviour are changing. In the past it has attracted extensive shaming and bullying by others they know. This perceived change may make it harder to protect those who are at risk and persuade teens to act safely if they don't believe there will be consequences.

However, severe adverse consequences did occur for a minority and in some cases several of these consequences occurred for one individual. This suggests a few people are having a very hard time as a result of sharing – they are bullied, threatened and

harassed and also can expect to have their image or video shared without their consent, as well as being pressured to send more. Sharers may not know their image has been misused.

Of those who had shared nudes:

- **17%** had their image shared without their consent
- **14%** were bullied or harassed because of their pictures/videos
- **14%** were pressured or threatened to send more images

(Some individuals experienced more than one of these outcomes).

'I keep getting messages asking me if I wanted to see someone nude.'

Girl, 11

'I like the person and thought it would make her like me.'

Boy, 14 (who was later bullied and harassed because of the photos.)

Gender

Those who prefer not to state their gender are more likely than other teenagers to say they had a bad time after sharing. Because the percentage is the same in each question, it suggests that a few people experienced more than one or several of these outcomes.

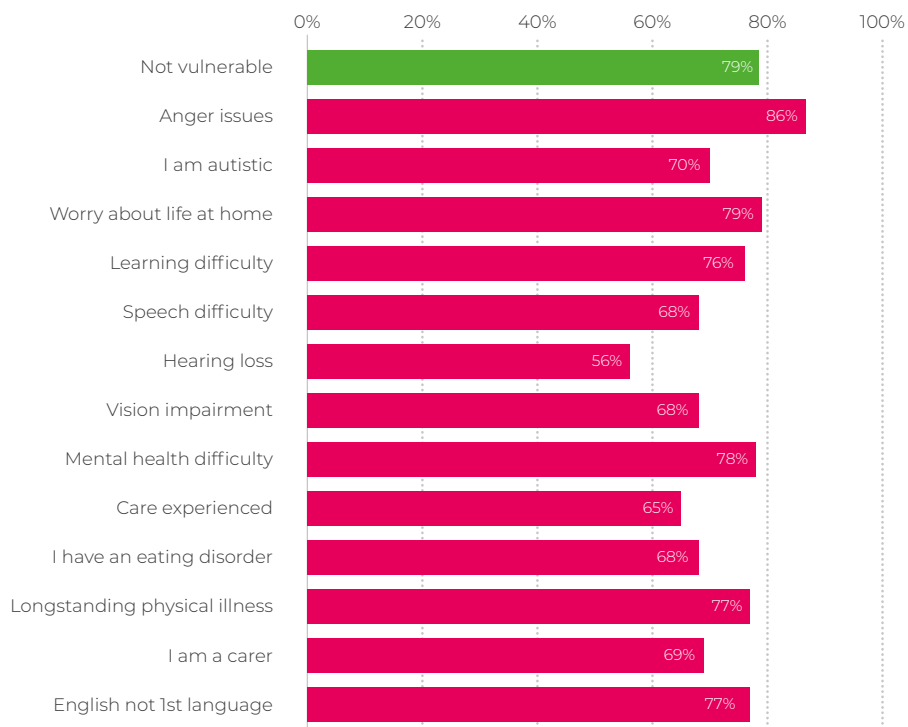
- They were threatened or pressured to send more images, **25%**
- They were bullied because of their pictures or videos, **25%**
- Their pictures were shared with others without their consent, **25%**

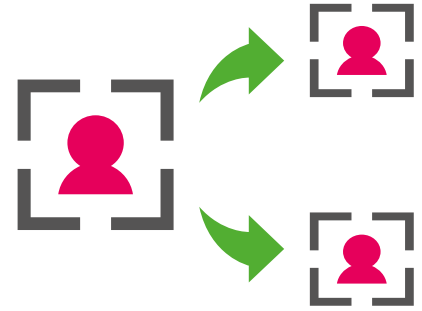
Boys were more likely than girls to be bullied (16% vs 12%) and to have their pictures shared without their consent (18% vs 10%). 44% of those in care were bullied and harassed because of the image as were 42% of young carers.

After sharing, vulnerable teens are less likely to say that nothing bad happened. Instead they are bullied, harassed or pressured or even threatened to send more images. Their images are often shared without their consent by the person they sent them to, particularly if the sharer has hearing impairments. Non vulnerable young people and those with anger issues are most likely to say nothing bad happened, those with a hearing impairment are least likely.

Chart 11. Nothing bad happened after I shared the photo.

Those who shared an image. By vulnerable group



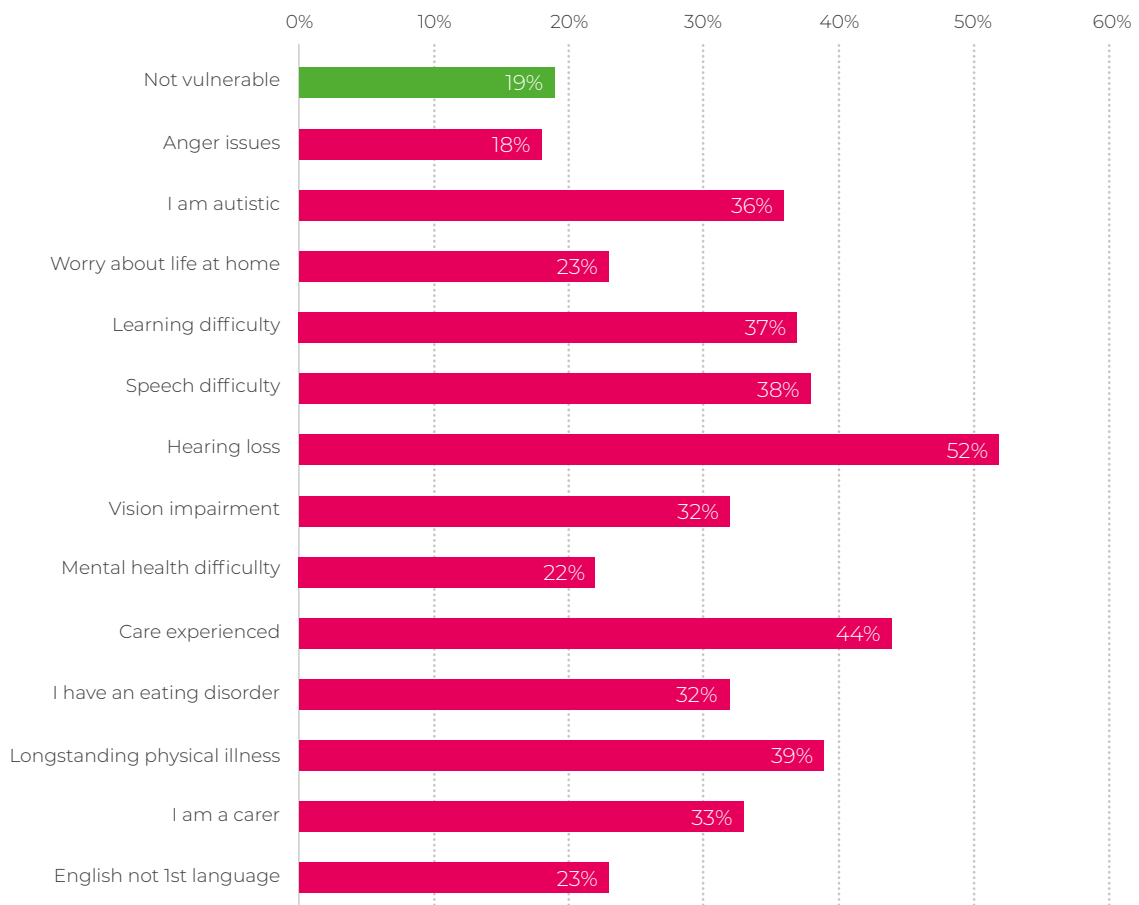


Consent betrayed

Pictures get shared amongst classmates, sometimes for status by the recipient¹⁷, or online if they fall into the hands of those who exploit and misuse the images. Having the photo shared without their consent is a shockingly likely outcome for those with hearing loss and teens in care. More than a third of each of these groups also report high levels of sharing their images: young people with a long-standing illness, those who are autistic and those with a learning difficulty. Pictures shared in revenge when a relationship ends are discussed on page 27.

Chart 12. The image was shared without my consent

By vulnerable group



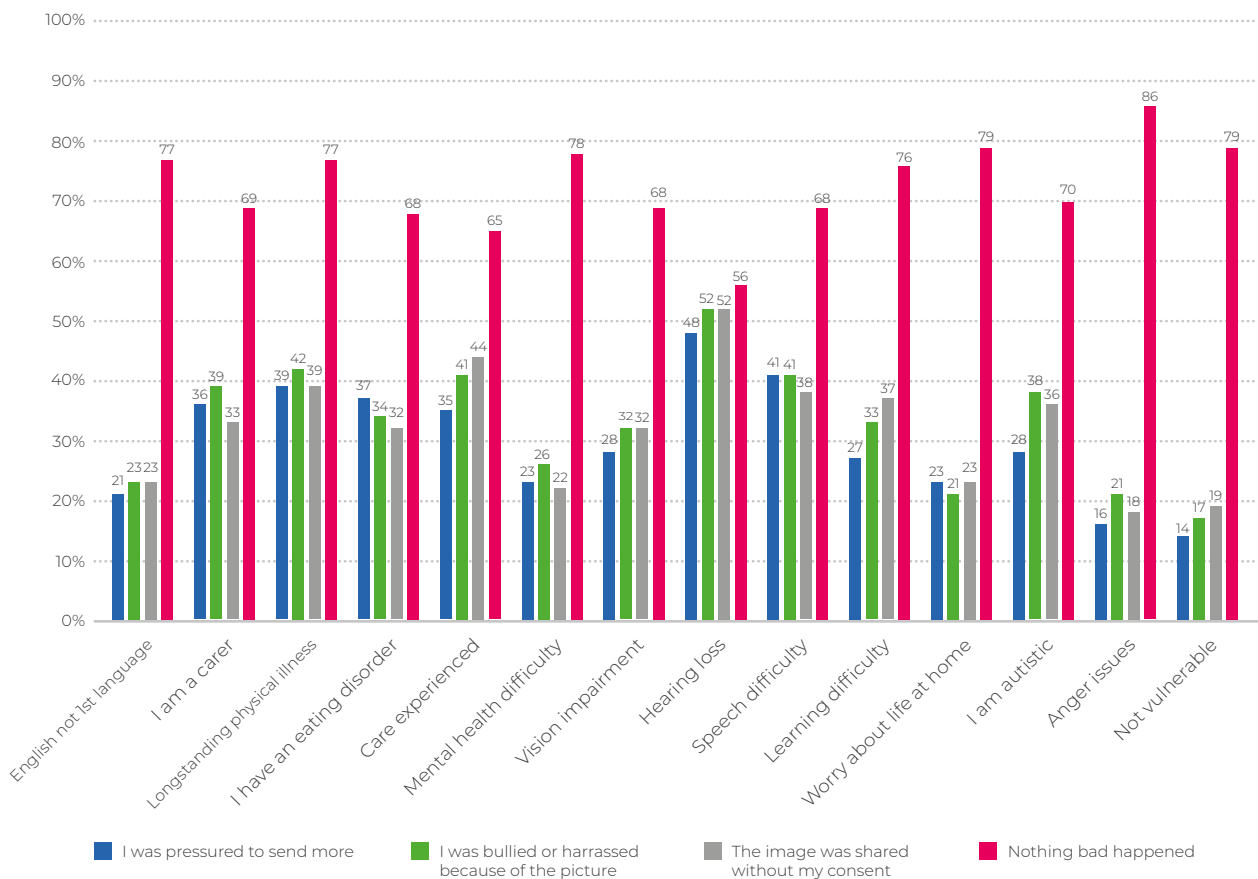
¹⁷Ringrose, Jessica, Gill, Rosalind, Livingstone, Sonia and Harvey, Laura (2012). A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': a report prepared for the NSPCC. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, London, UK.

Clusters of consequences

For teens who are already vulnerable offline, the consequences and impact of sharing images, videos or live streams are intense – in particular for the hearing impaired for whom these consequences cluster together. For those who are care experienced and those with speech difficulties there are also harmful consequence clusters that could overwhelm a young person. When investigating a case or offering support services, counsellors and therapists might look for other elements of the cluster.

Chart 13. What happened after you shared the image, video or livestream?

By vulnerable group





Ripples of risk

The related risks and harms that target vulnerable teens





The story of more malign experiences for vulnerable young people continues as they report a range of issues created or triggered by sending the initial image. Sharing nudes sets off, or sits within ripples of risk, from revenge sharing to solicitation, bullying and threats about what might happen unless they send further photos. They encounter people online who try to persuade them into sexual activity they did not want and while facing this barrage of risk, they tell us they lack online safety advice.

Revenge

Of all respondents, who had shared a nude, 12% said their image was widely reshared in revenge after a relationship had ended. This painful betrayal is, not surprisingly, far more frequent for those who shared nudes in a relationship rather than if they shared images 'for fun' or for other reasons, and sadly it was also more likely for vulnerable teenagers:

'After a relationship has ended, my photo/video was shared by a former partner or friend in revenge'. This happened to:

- **32%** of those with an eating disorder
- **28%** of those who are care experienced
- **25%** of those with speech difficulties
- **24%** who have hearing loss
- **22%** of teens with anger issues
- **20%** of young people with a mental health disorder

Fake solicitations

Among all the young respondents, 8% said this had happened to them: 'Someone who seemed to be a young person who was interested in me but later they turned out not to be who they said they were.'

Once again, the vulnerable groups were preyed upon:

- **36%** of those with an eating disorder 4 x more likely
- **26%** of those with speech difficulties more than 3 x more likely
- **22%** of those in care, or with hearing loss, were more than 2 x as likely

Someone online trying to persuade me into doing sexual activities I do not want to do

Although 13% of all respondents said they had experienced someone online trying to persuade them into some form of sexual activity they did not want, the experience was more common among the following groups of young people:

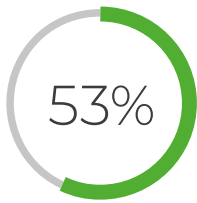
- Young people with an eating disorder were more than 3 x as likely: **43%**
- Young people with hearing loss were more than 2.5 x as likely: **35%**
- Young people who worry about life at home were 2.5 x as likely: **32%**
- Young people with a mental health difficulty and those in care were more than 2 x as likely: **31%**
- Young people with speech difficulties were more than 2 x as likely: **29%**

Weak or no online safety advice

Sharers also report less online safety advice in general, from school or parents.

Two thirds of those who shared explicit images say they learned about staying safe online at school in contrast to 81% of young people who did not share.

Only 39% of sharers learned to stay safe online from their parents or carers, in contrast to 58% of non-sharers. As many as 14% of sharers said they had never learned.



of sharers had met someone in real life they originally met online

Teens are not following the online safety advice they have been taught

The overall picture from our respondents is not promising: only a little over half of non-sharers say they always follow the online safety advice they learned and less than a third of the sharers follow it; 53% vs 31%. Teaching them may require a different approach, that takes into account their differing abilities and their emotional needs. It should also provide for a supportive exploration of their online lives in order to be relevant and helpful to them.

Meetups

Sexting can be a prelude to meeting up in person: whereas nearly 1 in 5, (18%) of all the respondents aged 13 and over had met up with someone they only knew online, in contrast, more than half of the sharers (53%) had done so. Teens who had never shared an image, were far less likely to do this: only 15% of non-

sharers met up. Clearly those who are less resilient and able to recognise danger are easily duped into thinking this could be a romantic meetup. Young people who prefer not to state their gender are more likely than their peers to agree to meet up.

The majority told someone beforehand, they met in a public place and most met someone roughly their age. It is vital not to ignore the fact for many young people these meetups were harmless, the person was known to their friend or they had heard of them through social circles or sport. Some took their mother along. Finding the right tone for advice is a challenge when navigating something becoming so common, which is inherently high risk and could lead to extreme assaults. However, where sexting precedes the meetup, as in the case of 53% of sharers, the hazard level is high. Young people who shared a nude or sexual image and went on to meet up with someone, were more likely to travel far, less likely to meet someone roughly their age, and more likely to say they were worried about something that happened at the meeting.

Chart 14. I have met up in real life with someone I only knew online.

By age

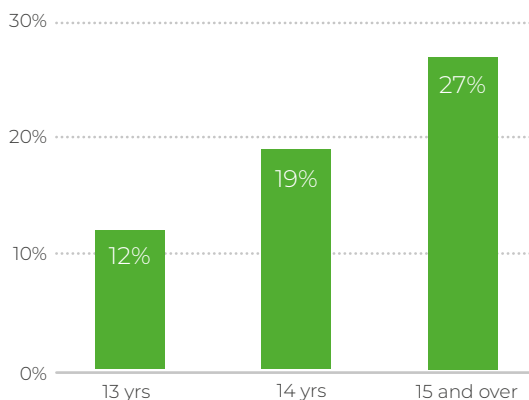


Chart 15. I have met up in real life with someone I met online.

By gender

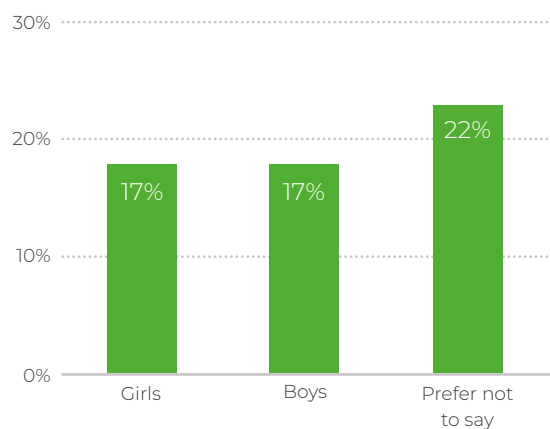
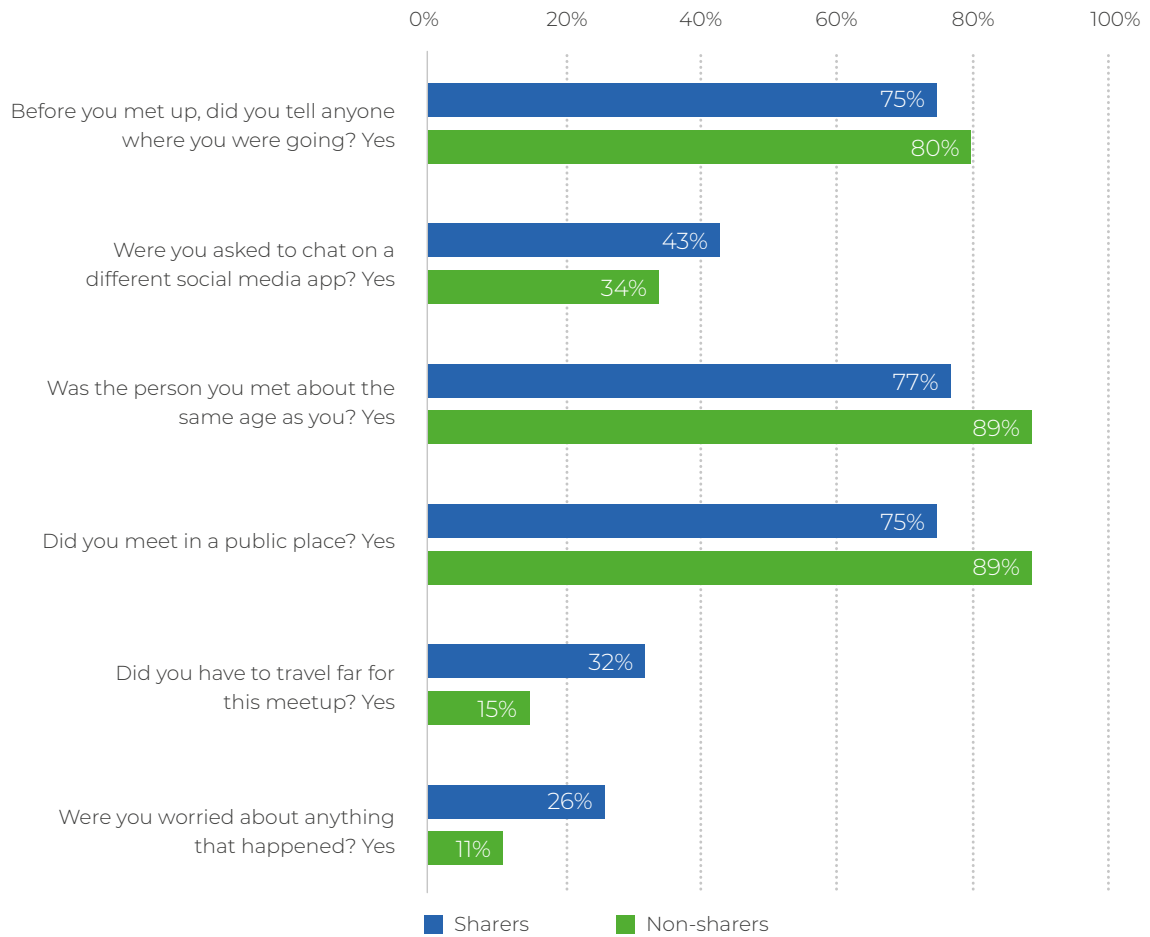


Chart 16. Meetups.*By sharers and non-sharers*

What else is going on in their offline lives?



*'I use my time online to
escape from reality'*

Boy 15

An emotional need to connect, be admired and loved

Looked at in comparison to their contemporaries, vulnerable young people with emotional needs are more likely to say they spend their time online posting and sharing images. These are not necessarily explicit images. However, over-sharing can lead other online users to identify someone as needy or wanting admiration. By paying them attention and pretending to become their friend or love interest, they can exert control over a young person or coerce them into sharing explicit images. While all social media users enjoy sharing photos, some betray their vulnerability in doing so excessively.

How they feel about their smartphone

Young people who share nudes are more dependent on their smartphone than those who never share nudes.

- Without my phone I often get irritated or anxious: **39% vs 19%**
- I often feel addicted to my phone: **33% vs 17%**

*'It makes me feel grumpy and I'm
scared that I've got an addiction.'*

Boy 11

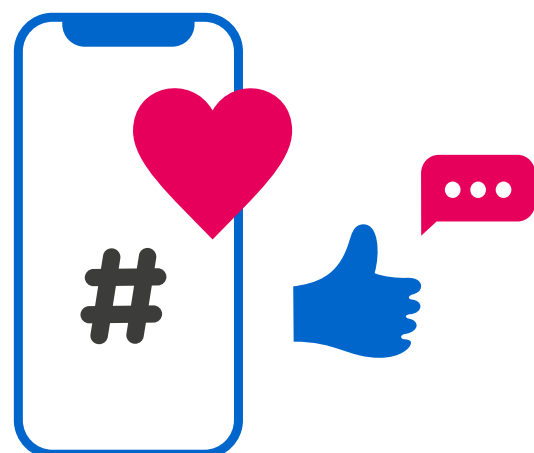
*'It's an escape for me from the
constant stress of daily life due to
existential worries and anxiety.
It is NOT an addiction.'*

Boy, 14

Escape into online life

Young people who share nudes talk differently about their online life, revealing a need to escape offline 'issues' or being online because it makes them 'feel good'. They are more likely than non-sharers to say they need to check what people say about them and fear they could lose friends if they are not online. Some feel that most of the time they are left anxious and depressed by their online life and they are more likely to say their online life influences 'how I try to look'.

This focus on young people's online lives through the lens of sharing nudes, has revealed the extent to which they also see content encouraging self-harm and even suicide, the way their online life influences how they try to look, their exposure to scams and hacking – their overall exposure to risk when compared to those who never share nudes. A punitive approach is likely to shut off the opportunity for a much-needed holistic intervention among people who believe that, most of the time: 'my online life has made me feel supported and connected to people'.



'I like my online life because I have time on my own.'

Prefers not to state gender, 11

'I feel lazy to do anything other than be in my bed and watch videos or chat.'

Boy, 16

Feelings and behaviour

- My online life has made me feel supported and connected to people most of the time: **sharers 37% vs non-sharers 29%** (This can be both positive and risky)
- My online life has left me feeling anxious or depressed most of the time: **16% vs 5%**
- My online life influences how I try to look most of the time: **26% vs 9%**
- Most of the time my online life has made me unhappy about how I look: **21% vs 8%**
- Because of my online life I sleep less: **51% vs 35%**
- I feel I could lose friends if I'm not online: **24% vs 9%**
- Most of the time I feel like other people when I'm on a screen: **24% vs 11%**
- Most of the time I need to keep checking what other people say about me: **26% vs 10%**
- I've often spent quite a bit of money in online games: **26% vs 5%**
- I've often been tricked into buying fake goods: **13% vs 2%**



Positive – or not necessarily?

- The internet has 'often' helped me make a good relationship with someone: **57% vs 30%**
- Because of my online life I feel good: **49% vs 38%**
- My online life helps me escape my issues most of the time: **35% vs 24%**

While these answers suggest positive outcomes, this is not always the case. It is evident that some are making what they believe to be genuine relationships or finding a refuge from their offline life, but a minority come under the influence of others and are targeted or harmed.

A picture of life online

Among a few teens, their choices of online activity are high risk. While the majority enjoy socialising and chatting with friends, listening to music and watching videos or streaming, they are drawn to other activities. It is this difference in the overall pattern of their online lives that gives clues about the support and intervention they need and illustrates how they are at risk in multiple ways.

We asked: 'Thinking about your time online, what do you go online to do?' Young people were asked to select the top five things they do most from a menu of 14 items.

Teens who shared nudes made different choices compared to non-sharers. All are aged 13 and over. They visit high risk areas online that most young people their age do not choose. Chat rooms and dating sites are not designed for young people and offer the possibility of unsafe meetings with strangers. Sharers are actively seeking new friends online on dating sites and in chat rooms. They are sharing what they are doing but also looking at adult content and visiting gambling sites.

'I get a lot of support from people online and it helps me,'

Prefers not to state gender, 12

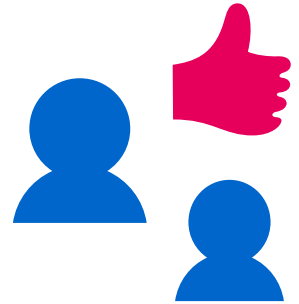
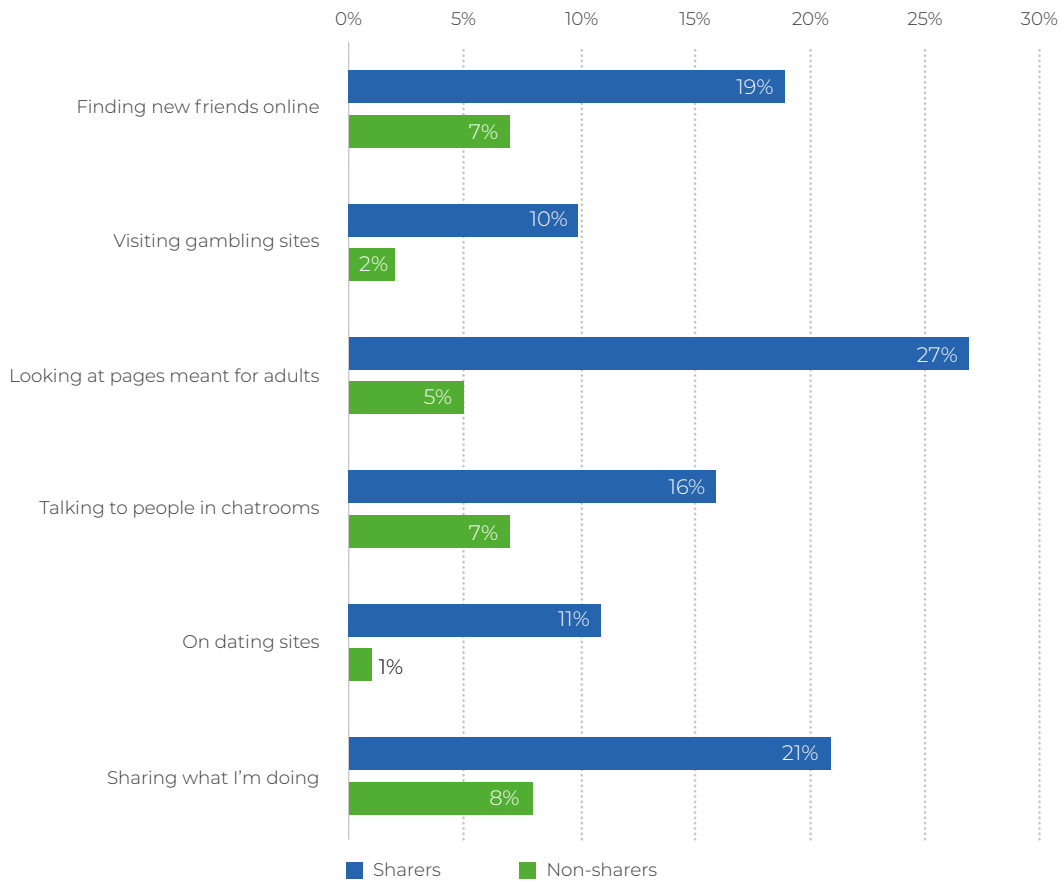


Chart 17. Thinking about your time online, what do you go online to do? Please pick five things you do most.
Sharers compared to non-sharers

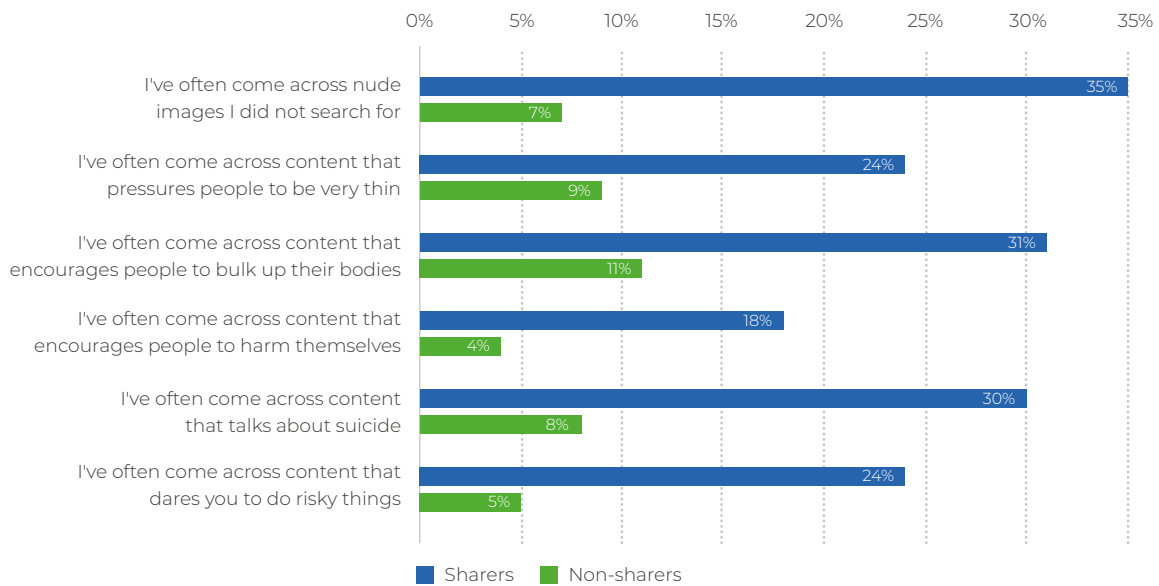


Beyond sharing nudes: the world encountered by sharers

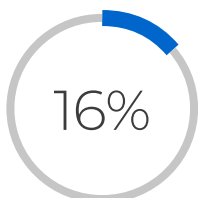
Looking beyond the sharing of images, those who shared nudes (sharers) describe a different online experience in which they are more likely than non-sharers to encounter content, contact and Cyberscam risks. Their reported experiences diverge from non-sharers for six types of content risk, a further five types of contact risk and two Cyberscam risks. They describe what happened often, rather than once or twice.

Chart 18. Content risk experienced 'often'.

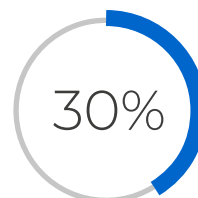
By sharers vs non-sharers



Sharers are at risk of online hazards in far broader ways such as falling for scams or being offered illegal goods online:



of sharers have often believed something that turned out to be a scam, vs 3% of non-sharers

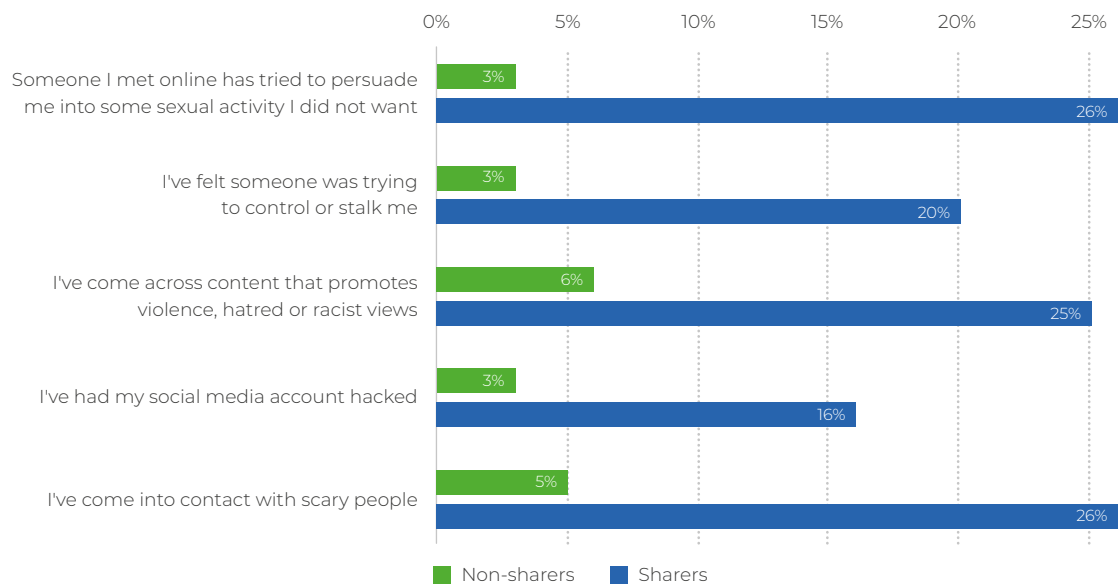


of sharers have often come across content that tried to sell illegal stuff vs 6% of non-sharers



Chart 19. Contact risks that happened 'often'.

By sharers vs non-sharers



A jigsaw of pressures

The pieces of this jigsaw of pressures to be thin, sexual advances, scams and self-harm create a picture of threats and pressure. More than half of the young sharers had met up with someone in real life they only knew online, and afterwards, were more than twice as likely to feel worried about something that happened during this meetup than non-sharers were. They were pressured by people they met online to take part in some form of unwanted sexual activity and often dared to do risky things. Coupled with being offered illegal goods, their situation is precarious, particularly because, a Rapid Evidence Review for the Independent Inquiry of Child Sexual Abuse, found the following factors, all discussed in this report,

among those characteristics which contributed to the likelihood of online facilitated child sexual abuse:

- Adverse childhood experiences
- Above average internet use increases vulnerability when interacting with other characteristics, such as having a disability or low self-esteem
- Risky online behaviours, such as sharing personal information and arranging to meet unknown contacts offline, may increase chance of online-facilitated CSA
- The minority of children who send sexual images in exchange for money or material goods are often subject to child sexual exploitation both on and offline.¹⁸

¹⁸ May-Chahal, C., Palmer, E., Dodds, S., & Milan, S. (2018). *Rapid Evidence Assessment: Characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation*. Lancaster: Lancaster University.

Parents' involvement





The young people who are sharing nudes experience less parental input than those who never share. They are more likely to feel they could never turn to their parents if they had a problem online and don't think their parents understand enough about staying safe online.

- Do you feel you could turn to them if you had a problem online? 'Never': **22% vs 8%**
- I follow the advice from my parents or carers most of the time: **26% vs 46%**
- 'Most of the time' I don't think my parents understand enough about this: **33% vs 18%**

Parents lack confidence when it comes to children's digital problems¹⁹

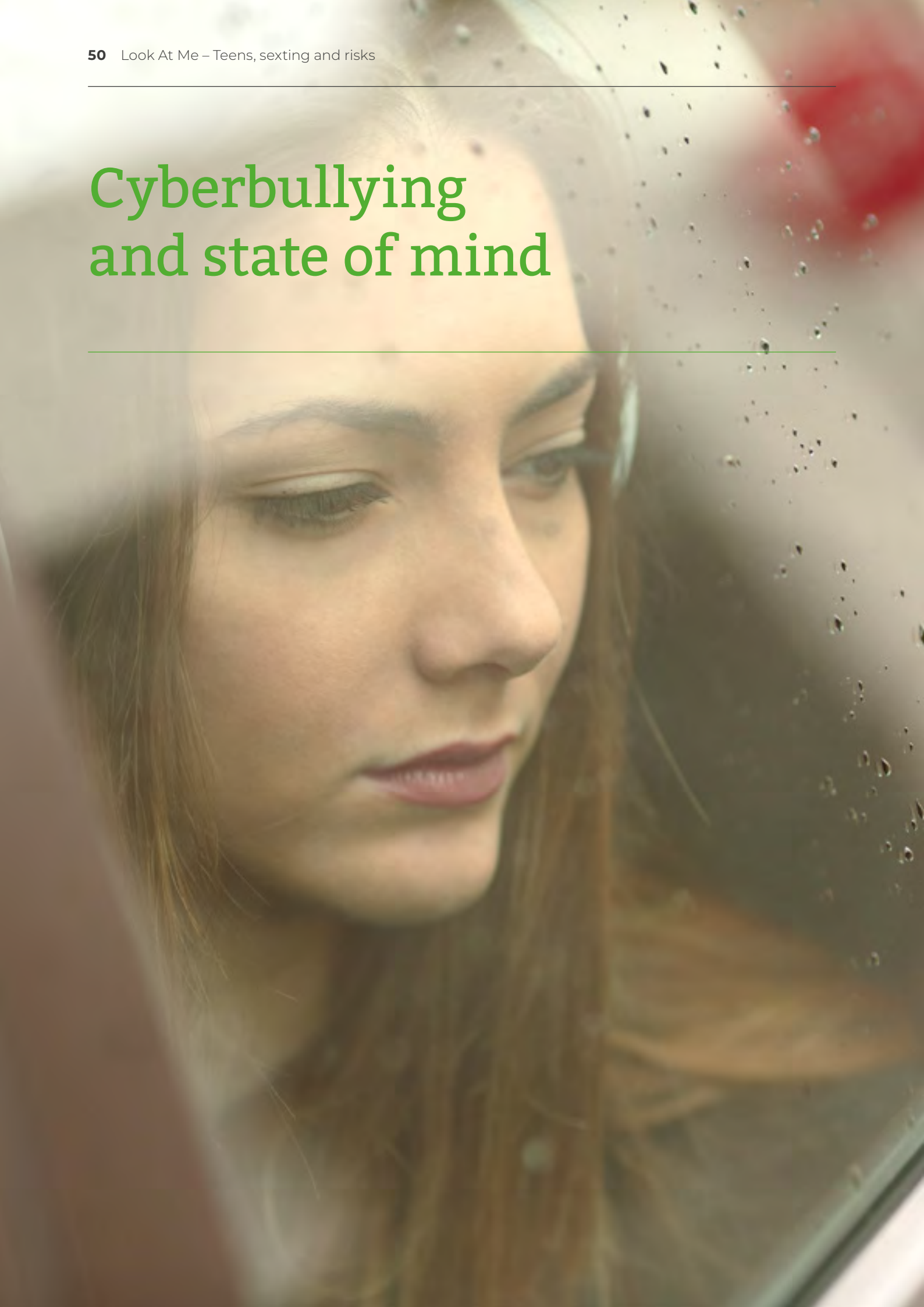
Ofcom Children's Media Lives reports (2016) showed that many parents lack confidence in their ability to support their children in preventing or dealing with online risks, they simply do not feel confident about using technology and digital media.

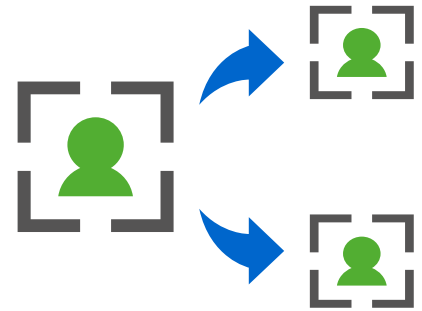
Parents' advice dwindles during adolescence when it is needed

Parents tend to step back from giving advice to their teens at just the moment sharing nudes begins to increase, as seen in table 3 on page 15. At age 14, only 15% say 'my parents talk to me about my online life'. Only half of teens aged 15 and over say they learned about online safety from their parents. Overall, parents could be encouraged to become more actively involved in their child's safety in digital spaces. Half of parents are not setting parental or privacy controls and over a third are not checking whether games, film or TV content are age-appropriate choices. Half the young people think that parents 'sometimes do not understand enough about online matters.'

¹⁹Ofcom Children's Media Lives reports (2016). *A Shared Responsibility: Building Children's Online Resilience*; Ofsted, 2010, *The Safe Use of New Technologies*; Weinstein, N and Przybylski, A. (2019). *The Impacts of Motivational Framing of Technology Restrictions on Adolescent Concealment*. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 90, 170-180.

Cyberbullying and state of mind





Young people who are sharing nudes are twice as likely to be cyberbullied as their peers (35% vs 17%).

Feeling good about yourself

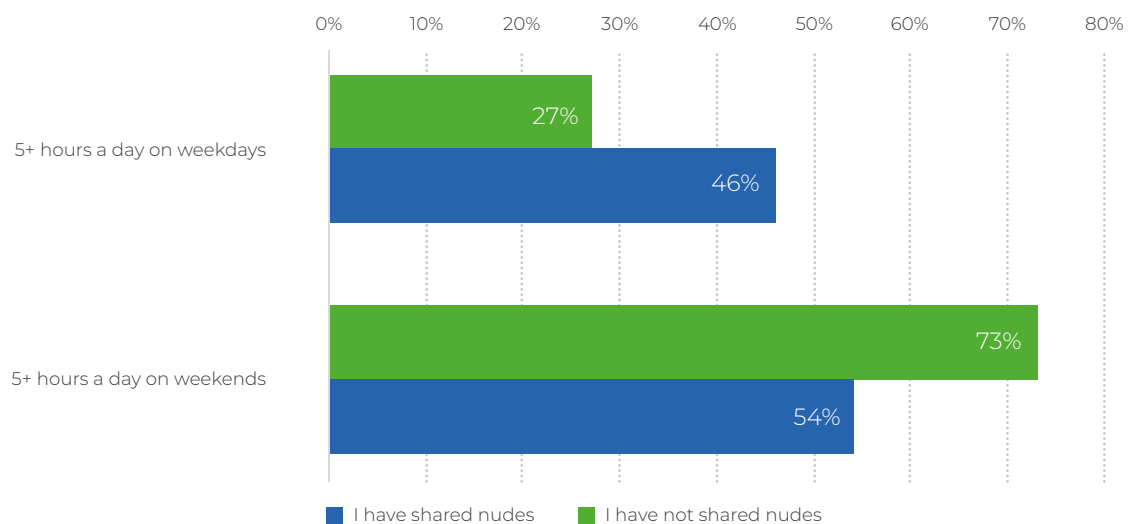
- Those who have shared nudes are more than twice as likely to say: 'I am hardly ever or never happy': **20% vs 9%**
- They are almost twice as likely to 'strongly disagree' that they 'fit in with others': **11% vs 6%**
- They are more likely to say 'I am hardly ever or never proud of things I do': **22% vs 14%**

5+ hours a day online

Young people who share nudes tend to spend longer online on weekdays than their peers and less on weekends.

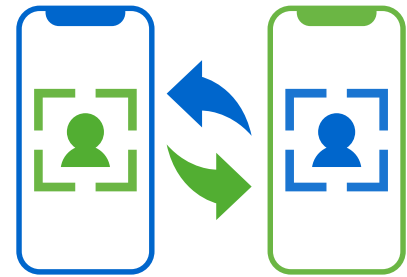
Chart 20. Spending 5+ hours a day online.

By those who shared nudes



Conclusion





These young people have thrown a light on disturbing experiences and their need for help.

What we have learned from them is that:

Sexting should not be viewed as an isolated behaviour. Sharing nudes is not a single behaviour that occurs in a vacuum. As well as teenage flirting and fun, romance and exploring sexuality - it reflects isolation, loneliness, emotional needs and far more. It might be thought of as an expression of a search for identity or an expression of emotional need. For some it is exciting to take risks.

Although most young people said nothing bad happened as a result, **sharing nudes is an indication that other potentially harmful online encounters and risks** within relationships are present, and are facilitated by the digital world, but potentially leading to meetups offline and ripples of risk. There are also clusters of consequences that may follow sharing of nudes, including bullying and harassment, images being shared without consent, and blackmail to send more. Sharers are at heightened risk of viewing pro-anorexia content, self-harm material and pro-suicide content. As a group compared to young people who have never shared a nude or sexual image, video or livestream, they are almost three times more likely to meet up in person with someone they met online, and are more likely to be worried by something that happened at that meeting.

Given that multiple vulnerability increases chances of sharing nudes from around 8% (1-2 vulnerabilities) to 14% (3-4 vulnerabilities) to about 26% for those who have ticked five or more vulnerabilities, it is vital to recognise the wider picture of the life lived by a young person. The patterns described here can help identify cases that require accelerated safeguarding and timely intervention for vulnerable young people.

Insights for practice

Education

- Online safety education should be effectively and sensitively linked with Relationships and Sex Education. This will require training and regular professional CPD updates. In addition to universal online safety education for all, there is an urgent need for targeted and acute support and education for some young people.

Staff Training

- Staff in the care sector and professionals in children's services should receive training to deliver targeted and acute online safety advice and support, that recognises offline vulnerability.

Referrals

- All referrals to services for sharing nudes, should include any known digital aspects of the case, including time spent online on an average day and whether or not cyberbullying is also present.

Fast tracked to services

- In a case involving sharing nudes, a young person's offline vulnerabilities should be 'scored' when they are considered for access to services where a threshold may be in place. The presence of vulnerabilities and other online risks should accelerate service access. Research has shown that online behaviours, such as sharing personal information and arranging to meet unknown contacts offline, may increase the chance of online-facilitated CSA.²⁰

²⁰May-Chahal, C., Palmer, E., Dodds, S., & Milan, S. (2018). *Rapid Evidence Assessment: Characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation*. Lancaster: Lancaster University.



Support for parents

- Parents need additional advice and support to address online relationships with their young people. This advice should make them aware of the emotional needs and offline adversities which may lie behind the actions.

Final considerations

A supportive approach for sharers at greater risk of further harm

Young people who are vulnerable offline are at greater risk of pressure and blackmail in connection with explicit images, and the implications for them are worrying. Those that do share nudes are shown to be at risk in further ways such as visiting high risk online environments or seeing harmful content. They are exploited and manipulated by others. If cases of sexting come to the notice of parents, schools and services, it is recommended that a supportive approach be taken to explore the young person's online life in a broader way. A punitive reaction might prevent the disclosure of other even more high risk or harmful experiences occurring concurrently. The young people need help to fulfil their emotional needs in safer ways.

Education and interventions need to change

Young people share naked pictures of themselves for a range of reasons that they perceive to be both positive and negative: 'I thought I looked good' or 'I wanted to' or 'I was pressured or blackmailed into doing it'. Moreover, they are fed a narrative from adults that 'sexting is endemic' - everyone is doing it (which normalises the behaviour) and that really

damaging things will happen if they participate in this activity (which doesn't relate to their experience). A more effective intervention would consider the whole child and ask open questions, such as, what needs are being fulfilled by their activities online?

Reasonable adjustments and respect

Education for a healthy relationship must be delivered in developmental stages with reasonable adjustments for the vulnerable young people outlined here. Tailored support is required alongside a respectful acknowledgement of why young people feel the need to take these steps as they search for a relationship. Learning about consent in the context of a healthy relationship, alongside online safety support is key. Both parents and schools have failed these young people, too many of whom say they have not been taught to stay safe online.

Harm from strangers or peers?

The harm from a stranger, a hacker or a scammer often features in online safety education, whereas peer on peer abuse is less commonly addressed. Sexual harm may originate from peers or partners as seen in this survey. The tone of online safety education is also important. Educators need to recognise that teens are not responding well to negative and avoidance-based messaging. Furthermore, there is a risk that young people might be left feeling that they failed to prevent it happening –that the responsibility is all theirs rather than shared with wider society.

Aftercare and support

After a disclosure, and when support is provided over the following weeks, it would be appropriate to consider that other online harms are likely to be present concurrently.

Conclusion

This report dispels some myths about sexting and delivers some hard to hear home truths about vulnerable children and young people and their likelihood to send nude images of themselves. As ever, it is those struggling already that are under the most pressure when it comes to getting naked online. We know that rules-based safety education, full of dos and don'ts simply doesn't resonate with the experience of young people and therefore will become even more irrelevant to them. Whilst we all recognise the risk and regard with concern, the reality of our teenagers sending intimate images of themselves, their experience and perception overwhelmingly is that nothing bad happens.

The challenge is, that for those for whom bad things do happen, the consequences can be devastating. The messages in this report should be a wake up call to the sectoral organisations dedicated to helping vulnerable young people, to those delivering online safety education in and out of school and to those who set the curriculum. Parents have a role to play in educating their children about expectations in relationships, respect and privacy. Parents and professionals can find resources on all these issues and many more on internetmatters.org.

Internet Matters would like to thank the schools that participated in this research and especially the young people who answered these tricky questions. The insights in this report would not have been possible without you. Equally, sincere thanks to Adrienne Katz, Aiman El Asam and all at Youthworks Consulting, for their tireless work in writing this report.



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