

What can make young people vulnerable online

Many parents and carers worry about their children being at risk online, especially about the possibilities of grooming and sexual exploitation. Here we highlight some of the factors that may make young people vulnerable.

## **Risk and Protection**

Imagine vulnerability to sexual exploitation as a weighing scale, with risks on one side and protections on the other. If the protective factors outweigh the risks, then a young person is likely to be resilient and able to cope more effectively when confronted with a harmful situation. The opposite is true as well: if the risks outweigh the protective factors for a young person, they are likely to be more vulnerable.

These risk and protective factors can come from any area of the young person's life: they can be individual (to do with character and personality) or come from family, friends, wider community or culture.

## **What Increases risk?**

There are some things that are likely to increase a young person's vulnerability to online sexual victimisation, either temporarily or over a longer period of time.

*It is important to remember that these vulnerabilities are based on research that looks at patterns of experiences of young victims and it should **not** be anticipated that a young person will become a victim if they are demonstrating one or even several of these features. It is anticipated that many teenagers will experience at least some of these vulnerabilities at some point.*

- Low self-esteem.
- Questioning sexual orientation.
- Risk-taking behaviour online.
- Previous victimisation.
- Problems within the family.
- Lack of parental involvement in online life.
- Social isolation.
- Difficulties with friends.
- Problems at school.

The reasons for these vulnerabilities are often complex and interrelated, but if you become aware that your child is experiencing any of these, they are likely to need extra support and protection.

## **What Can You Do?**

### **Start discussions with your child**

The most important thing you can do is to have conversations with your child about their life online.

- Research suggests that regular discussions between parents and children act as a protective factor, helping to decrease vulnerability to sexual victimisation online. The conversation can start with their favourite online activities, move on to their knowledge of the associated risks and then explore whether they are currently worried about anything online.
- Often parents are concerned about how to start this type of conversation. For tips, see the parents' section of CEOP's [ThinkuKnow \(link is external\)](#) site.
- Identify other adults that your child can talk to if they are worried about something or someone online. This might include you, an aunt or uncle, a family friend, CEOP or Childline.
- If you are aware your child is experiencing some of the issues listed above, make an extra effort to discuss the impact the situation is having on them, how they are feeling and any changes in their current internet use.

### **Internet Monitoring**

- Be aware of changes to the way that your child uses the internet, including how much time they spend online. Young people who have been groomed online often showed a gradual or dramatic increase in the amount of time they spent online at around the time they were being victimised. A rise in the intensity of internet use is a possible indicator of online victimisation.
- Research suggests that young people's knowledge of parents' involvement in their internet use can be a protective factor. Depending on what is agreed between you and your child, you could arrange to be connected via social media (e.g. become Facebook friends) or agree to check their profile regularly. Turn on the parental controls for your internet service provider, network provider and on the device itself. Remember to do this for devices in the family home and those that your child has individual access to (such as mobiles or tablets). For help on how to do this for the individual item, see our article on filters.

## **Talk to your child's school**

The most beneficial way to protect young people online is for a joint response between the child, the parents/carers, the school and other adults in the young person's life.

- Find out whether your child has had internet safety education at school. Effective internet safety education covers a range of topics and is regularly addressed across different stages of the curriculum.
- If it appears that internet safety is not consistently being taught, it might be worth inquiring with a teacher at the school. You can suggest they make use of the range of free resources at [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/teachers](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/teachers) (link is external).
- Asking your child about internet safety lessons at school can help introduce online safety into your conversations.

It is important to remember that many children who encounter risks online are resilient and do not suffer any negative effect of the risk. However, for a significant minority, these risks can lead to online sexual victimisation. By using some of the tips above, you can help your child to stay resilient and protected.