Recognising and Responding to Online Abuse

Online Child Exploitation Unit,
Garda National Protective Services Bureau

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An Garda Síochána
Seirbhís náisiúnta póilíneachta agus slándála na hÉireann
Ireland's National Police & Security Service

Online Child Exploitation Unit

OnCE

- Online Child Exploitation Unit, currently comprises of 3 Detective Sergeants and 6 Detective Gardaí. We are attached to the Garda National Protective Services Bureau

Our two main areas of work fall under

1. Victim Identification:

- Hotline referrals
- Interpol and Europol Referrals,
- “Self-generated” Welfare cases where we make a joint approach with TUSLA to family

2. Investigations:

- Investigation and co-ordination of cases relating to the possession, distribution and production of child pornography, and any related sexual abuse or exploitation of children.
- Proactive investigation of intelligence concerning paedophiles and their use of technology.

Presentation Overview

- Part One: Child Pornography
- Part Two: Child Exploitation
- Part Three: Question & Answers Session

Part One: Child Pornography (CSAM)

- Key sections of the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998.
- Offences and definitions (focus on Sections 5 & 6)
- Harmful Communications Act, commonly referred to as Coco's Law-Intimate Image Abuse
- Emerging online threats: deepfakes & sexting
- Prevention / Education

Child Trafficking & Pornography Act 1998 as amended (CTPA)

Section 2 – Definition of what constitutes Child Pornography.

A Child is defined as someone under 18 years of age

- Images and Videos of a Child, that shows, for a sexual purpose, the genital or anal region of a child or a person depicted as being a child
- Sexual activity of a child, with a child or in the presence of a child
- A person depicted as a child
- A cartoon image of the above /AI
- Includes documents, audio recordings, sexualised chat with a child, printed material, text stories etc. (Chat)

Child Trafficking & Pornography Act 1998 as amended (CTPA)

Section 6 Possession of Child Pornography (5yrs)

- Must be “knowingly” in possession or obtains access
- Deleted images may be retrieved.

Section 5 Producing/Distributing (14 yrs)

- An offence to **produce, distribute, transmit, publish, sell, supply, or make available** child pornography
- It also covers advertising or facilitating others in those activities.

S5 & S6 – Key Points for Youth Workers

- Young people may become involved in sharing or forwarding images under peer pressure or misunderstanding, this law captures those behaviours.
- Knowing that possession, production, distribution and the **intent** to share are all illegal under this act.
- The law aims to catch not only final-acts (showing, selling) but all stages: spreading, offering, encouraging others)

Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law)

- **Created two new criminal offences** covering the non-consensual distribution of intimate images and wider online harassment.
- **Illegal to share or threaten to share intimate images** without the person's consent, *regardless of intent* – even if it was "just a joke," it's a criminal act.
- **Offenders can face up to 12 months in prison (summary offence)** or **up to 7 years (indictable offence)** if intent to cause harm is proven.
- **Youth workers are key to early intervention** – helping young people understand the law, their rights, and the serious consequences of digital misuse.

Hotline.ie

- **Hotline.ie = Ireland's service for reporting illegal online content**
  Confidential. Anonymous. Fast.

They deal with:

- Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)
- Online child sexual exploitation & grooming
- Intimate-image abuse (e.g. non-consensual sharing)
- Racist or xenophobic content
- Scam websites/emails pretending to be Irish

Why it matters:

- They help remove harmful content from the internet and protect people from abuse and re-victimisation.
- **Reports are checked by analysts and passed to Gardaí or platforms if needed.**

Hotline.ie

What Professionals working with young people should Know

1. Encourage young people to report – even if unsure.
They don't have to be right; Hotline.ie will check.

2. Reports can be anonymous.
No personal info is needed unless the person wants follow-up.

3. Hotline.ie is for illegal *online* content.
Immediate danger or real-world threats? → Call Gardaí.

4. You can support a young person to report
– together on the Hotline.ie website (simple, fast, secure)

Website: www.hotline.ie

CTPA vs Coco's Law

- When children under the age of 18 engage in sexting by way of sending or even receiving an intimate image they are in contravention of the CTPA and according to the letter of the law, could be prosecuted and convicted.
- CTPA was designed to protect children from adult predators and as such AGS utilise their police discretion when presented with consensual sexting cases.
- Coco's Law was designed for privacy violations, and enables the investigation and prosecution of non-consensual sharing of intimate images.
- Coco's Law accounts for both child and adult victims and suspects. However, when children fall victim to this non-consensual sharing, it is the CTPA, that is typically utilised.

The Digital Age

- Vast majority of teenagers now own both a tablet and a smart phone
- Age at which children are getting devices is getting younger and younger (communion age)
- ‘Digital Natives’ digital media and technology is pervasive in young people’s lives. There is no clear separation between young people’s online and offline lives.
- Generational Gap between caregivers and the young person can lead to inadequate monitoring of young persons online activity. Parents are not supervising their children's internet usage – either they claim “sure I don't know how to use that”
- Children are becoming far more sexually aware at a much younger age, access to pornography and being online

Sexting / Sending Nudes

- Research conducted by Zeeko, an Internet Safety company, between 2016 and 2018 found that approximately 1 in 7 adolescents surveyed had sent a sext image and nearly half of surveyed Irish teenagers in their last year at school have engaged in sexting.
- Much research concludes that sexting is a normative behaviour of adolescent sexual development in the digital age.
- Challenge for professionals-It is difficult to know when to intervene if a young person needs support. It's a delicate balance of trying not to invade the privacy of the child vs protecting the child from risk of harm.
- Its important to differentiate between consensual sexting and non-consensual sharing of images.
- Consensual sexting is not illegal or considered child pornography in Canada- 'Private Use Exception'.
- There is little to no evidence to suggest that any images produced in a sexting exchange have fallen into the hands of paedophiles, the two markets typically don't intersect.

Education on Sexting

- Research shows that the abstinence approach or threat of the law does not work
- It only serves to prevent young people from reporting or seeking support.
  "Why would we seek help if we are going to be criminalised"
  Same as historical sex education in Ireland
- Informing on the associated risks, will empower the young person to make informed decision.
- Cant be viewed from an adult lens- non-judgemental approach.
- Focus should not be on the act of sexting itself but the wider societal issues like consent, boundaries and gender dynamics.
- Space for dialogue and open conversation, start the conversation, don't wait for something to happen. Young people have expressed wanting to talk to adults in their lives about these issues and not relying on the internet for information.
- Community approach, no one person's role or responsibility, all stakeholders in children's lives.

WebWise

- The **Irish Internet Safety Awareness Centre**, co-funded by the Dept. of Education and EU.
- Provides information, advice and free resources for **young people, parents, teachers**, and **youth workers**.
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- Covers topics like cyberbullying, image-sharing, social media, digital citizenship, and online wellbeing

Why it's useful for youth workers

Use	Benefit
Understands what apps & platforms teens are using	Helps in relevant conversations & intervention
Up-to-date explainers & guides	Explanations of what apps do, risks, privacy settings
Teaching / training resources	For integrating digital safety into youth work & education
Support for parents & guardians	Helps you advise families, not just young people

AI & Deepfakes

What are Deepfakes?

AI-generated fake images, videos, or voices that look real.

The name comes from:
"**Deep**"- deep learning (a type of computer program that learns patterns)
"Fake"- its something that isn't real but looks convincing.

How It Happens

•Young people may create sexualised deepfake images or videos of classmates or peers to humiliate or intimidate them.

•Often done using selfies, social media photos, or publicly available images.

•Shared via WhatsApp, Snapchat, Discord, or private groups, thinking it's "funny" or just a joke.

•Can escalate to threats, blackmail, or peer pressure, causing serious emotional harm

AI & Deepfakes

A pornographic deepfake that depicts a child is considered child pornography and can be investigated under the CTPA and/or Coco's Law.

Risks for Young People

- Used in **bullying & shaming** (fake sexual/embarrassing content).
- Can lead to **exploitation or blackmail**.
- Cause **reputation damage** – content spreads fast and lasts online.

Role of Youth Workers

- **Early intervention matters:** Preventing creation, educating on consent, and encouraging reporting are key young people to question online content.
- **Support victims** — reduce shame, encourage open talk.
- **Confidential Reporting** threats or exploitation to Gardaí quickly.
- Promote **digital resilience** and safe sharing habits.

Key Message: Deepfakes can seriously harm young people-awareness, support and early action are vital

Part Two : Child Exploitation

- Section 3 Child Exploitation of CTPA 1998
- Grooming
- Spotting the signs
- What can you do?
- Trend-Financial Sextortion

Child Trafficking & Pornography Act 1998 as amended (CTPA)

Section 3 Sexual Exploitation of a Child (life)

A child is defined as being under 18 years under this act

- Inviting, inducing, or coercing the child to:
- Engage in prostitution
- The production of Child Pornography
- Participate in any sexual activity
- Observe any sexual activity (Sexual or indecent)

Understanding Online Child Grooming

What Is Online Child Grooming?

- Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for sexual exploitation, abuse, or trafficking.
- Often starts on social media, gaming platforms, or messaging apps.
- Groomers may pose as peers, use fake profiles, or exploit vulnerabilities.
- The chat can get sexualised very quickly.
- Can involve gifts, compliments, secrecy, or emotional manipulation

Growing Issues

Increase in Online Enticement Reports:

- Reports of online enticement, where adults communicate with children for sexual purposes, have risen significantly.
- In 2024, the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) received over 546,000 tips related to online enticement, marking a 192% increase from the previous year.

Spotting the Signs

- Sudden secrecy around devices or apps
- Increased time online, especially at night
- Withdrawal from friends or usual activities
- Receiving gifts, money, or devices from unknown sources
- Inconsistent stories about online contacts

What to Do – Taking Action

- Build open, trusting relationships with young people.
- Report concerns early to Gardaí
- Document what is seen/heard — facts, not assumptions.
- Do not confront the suspected individual directly.
- Encourage education around safe online behaviour, only chat to people they know in real life

👮 Prevention starts with awareness. If something feels off, it probably is — trust your instincts and escalate concerns.

Financial Sextortion

What is it?

- A form of online exploitation where perpetrators **coerce teens into sending explicit images** or performing sexual acts.
- Often involves **threats of exposure** or **financial demands**.

Key Statistics:

- In 2023, NCMEC received **26,718 reports** of financial sextortion, up from **10,731 in 2022**.
- Over the past three years, the number of online enticement reports increased by more than **300%**

Financial Sextortion

How It Happens:

- Offenders pose as peers or romantic interests online.
- Teens are **manipulated after sharing intimate content**.

Who Is Affected:

- Most victims are **boys aged 14–17**, but all teens are at risk.
- Can escalate to emotional distress and long-term trauma.

Questions?