protecting children
from sexual abuse

The internet and children –
what's the problem?

Stop it Now! UK & Ireland is supported by an alliance of the following organisations which constitutes its Advisory Council:

Barnardo's

Faith groups

NCH

NOTA

NSPCC

Survivor groups

Thames Valley Partnership

The London Child Protection Committee

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation

Voice UK

Representatives from the Home Office, DfES and the DOH.

Representative from the Welsh Assembly Government.

Representatives from the Offices of the Children's Commissioners for England, Northern Ireland and Wales attend the Stop it Now! Advisory Council as observers.

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Stop 04.

Contents

Stop it Now! UK & Ireland is a campaign that aims to stop child sexual abuse by encouraging abusers and potential abusers to seek help and by giving adults the information they need to protect children effectively.

Stop it Now! believes that sexual abuse is preventable and challenges adults to create a society that no longer tolerates the sexual abuse of children.

"My life has fallen apart. I feel utterly ashamed of myself and I don't know if I can face the world again. I don't know if my wife and children will ever forgive me for this."

A caller to the Helpline who had recently been arrested for child pornography offences.

"I tried very hard to resist the abuse. I was told it was normal. I felt bad, dirty and awful. A couple of clicks of his camera changed my life completely. The pictures meant that the abuse went on and on."

A woman who had been abused in childhood by someone who had taken sexually abusive images of her.

"Although I didn't want to look at the images of the children, I felt pushed into it by my mates. So I downloaded and saved them but never looked at them again."

15 year old boy. An examination of his computer verified that he had not looked at the images once he had saved them.

The internet and mobile phones have become part of our every day social and working lives. The majority of families now have a computer in their homes and may use the internet for finding out information, communicating with family, friends and colleagues and for learning new things. A world has opened up which offers many positive opportunities – ten years ago, who would have imagined that we would be ordering our weekly shopping, booking our holidays or talking to and forming relationships with people we have never met – all online?

Although these new technologies offer a wealth of new experiences and possibilities, we also need to be aware of the fact that they can be used inappropriately by men, women and young people some of whom have a sexual interest in our children and might sexually harm them.

This leaflet :

- Encourages people to question their own use of the new technologies and to seek advice.

- Gives useful tips about how to help children remain safe whilst on the net.

- Provides the information needed to recognise the tell tale signs that someone may be using the new technologies in sexually inappropriate or harmful ways.

- Enables people to build up confidence to do something about it.

At the end of this leaflet there is a list of helpful resources which you can access for further advice on how to keep children and young people safe online. There is also an 'internet jargon buster list' which explains what is meant by the different terms used to describe aspects of the new technology.

"I couldn't wait to get back from school, switch on my computer and get chatting with him. I can't believe he'd hurt other girls. I felt I could trust him with my life."

A teenage girl groomed on the net.

"I wish I'd questioned him earlier when I felt uneasy about his behaviour on the internet. I can't get over the fact that he was looking at pictures of children being sexually abused. How could he do such a thing?"

Wife of a man who downloaded abusive images from the internet.

The majority of children are sexually abused by someone they know – he or she may be a family friend, a neighbour, a member of the child's family or someone working with children. The abuser is often someone the child loves and cares about… even if they have only met them online.

Adults can recognise signs that behaviour is becoming sexually abusive and take positive steps to prevent it. Stop it Now! urges people to stop and seek help if they are using or are thinking of using the new technologies to look at sexual images of children, or to harm them in other ways.

"When the policeman came to our house and talked to me I didn't tell him a thing to begin with. He told me that he knew I had been 'chatting' with this bloke and knew what we had talked about. All I could think about was what my mum would say to me if she ever discovered what I had been saying."

15 year old girl groomed via a chatroom.

For the purposes of this leaflet the term 'new technologies' refers to computers, digital cameras and mobile phones. Many phones are now internet-enabled and are also able to capture and store images and video material. They can be used to access mobile chatrooms and for digital photography. They are often referred to as 3G phones.

As computers, mobile phones and digital cameras have developed we have seen how these new technologies can be misused, including by those intent on sexually harming children and young people. We are also learning how children and young people may place themselves at risk and be vulnerable to abuse. When communicating via the internet and mobile phones, young people tend to become less wary and talk about things far more openly than they might when communicating with someone face to face.

Young people may not always follow 'keep safe on the net' advice. By the very nature of their age and development, they tend to be adventurous and prepared to take risks. They are often fearful of their parents, carers, other important adults in their lives and even their friends finding out what they have said to other people whilst communicating on the 'net'.

Also, if they have been the victims of child pornography, they often have a sense of shame and feel responsible and guilty for what has happened which makes it very difficult for them to tell anyone about it. It is important to give our children a clear message that it's OK to tell, even if they feel they have done something wrong.

Therefore, it is important that all adults are aware of the potential dangers to children and young people and are able to prevent them from being harmed. We can do this by recognising the warning signs and by encouraging the people concerned to question their behaviour and stop. The Stop it Now! Helpline provides confidential advice to people whose behaviour is of concern and to those close to them who are trying to get the message across that the behaviour is harmful.

Why do we need to know about the new technologies and how they may be used to sexually harm children?

Over the past twenty years, we have come to understand the true extent of child sexual abuse and the impact that it has both on child victims and on the wider family. We know that children are unlikely to tell anyone if they have been sexually abused and that the harm sexual abuse causes can impact on them for the rest of their lives. The sooner abuse is identified, the sooner the healing process can begin for all concerned.

Both male and female adults and some young people may use the new technologies to harm children. Some do this by looking at, taking and/or distributing photographs and video images on the internet of children naked, in sexual poses and/or being sexually abused – this is called child pornography.

- **Looking at photographs and video images on the internet of children naked, in sexual poses and/or being sexually abused.**
  Although the sites that host this material are illegal, people are still able to gain access and some will actively seek them out. Some people will say they came across the images by accident, but this is rarely the case. Over time, some will feel they have become addicted to such material and find that they are sexually aroused by them. This may lead to them developing a compulsive need to view more images.

- **Taking photographs, videos and DVDs of children naked, in sexual poses or being sexually abused.**
  These images will, generally, be taken with a digital camera which means that makers of the images do not have to take their films to be developed – they can just download them onto their computers. This makes it much easier to keep such activity secret. The newer models of mobile phones can be used for digital photography as well as for making videos. Many are also able to connect to the internet which makes the distribution of such videos even easier.

- **Distributing these images via the internet.**
  Some people might choose to distribute these abusive images to others with a sexual interest in children. The images may also be shown to children and young people by someone who is intent on sexually abusing them and wants to 'normalise' the activity in the eyes of the child. Images may be distributed via a computer or via a mobile phone.

The harm caused to the children who are the subjects of these images is not always recognised. They often feel guilty for what has happened, are frightened about who will see the pictures and have to live with the fear that their pictures will be on the net forever. Also, it is not always recognised that through viewing child pornography people's behaviours might change and they might be tempted to sexually harm children more directly. Such people may feel anxious and concerned about their own thoughts and feelings and they need help to prevent them from harming a child.

We do not yet have enough research to understand how likely it is that someone who has looked at abusive images of children, may also go on to distribute them or even to sexually abuse a child directly. However, all these activities are illegal and show that the person has a sexual interest in children which needs stopping. What we need to remember is that such images are capturing the sexual exploitation and abuse of a child.

> "People who look at abusive images of children are no different from those who sexually abuse them and photograph the abuse. They might just as well have been standing in the room when the abuse happened."
>
> *Male victim of sexually abusive image production.*

Other ways in which the new technologies may be used to sexually harm children are:

- **Communicating and forming a 'friendship' with children online with the intent of arranging to meet them in the 'real world' to sexually abuse them.**
  This process of developing a relationship with a child online is often called manipulation or 'grooming' and chatrooms and social networking sites are the most likely places for such behaviour to start. The 'real time' nature of chat and social networking sites offers particular opportunities for direct and immediate contact. Children may be encouraged to give personal details, to go off into a private chatroom and also to use a webcam and voice technologies.

  In some cases, relationships may be initiated in a chat room or social networking site and continued through instant messaging, email and telephone (often mobile) contact. Instant messaging differs from ordinary email in that the messages are delivered immediately making dialogue much easier. It also offers the facility of private chatrooms and file transfer in which people can send and receive computer files.

Social networking sites link people with similar views and interests. They also allow users to share videos from a range of devices including personal computers, laptops, video mobile phones and game consoles. Some children and young people become prey to bullying behaviour whilst others reveal personal information about themselves which may place them at risk of online predators. There are also concerns regarding the way some young people use these sites to bully and threaten their peers.

- **Encouraging children to hold sexual conversations in which they are instructed to engage in, and talk about, sexual behaviour – this is sometimes referred to as cybersex.**
  The most common places for an abuser to start targeting and grooming children for these purposes are teen chatrooms. Such behaviour takes place online, without physical contact between the abuser and child. Despite the lack of physical contact, children can be frightened and traumatised by such behaviour.

Grooming is a word used to describe how people who want to sexually harm children and young people get close to them, and often their families, and gain their trust. They do this in all kinds of places – in the home or local neighbourhood, the child's school, youth and sports club, the local church and the workplace.

"It wasn't the physical things that he did, but what he did to my head that ruined my life."

Female victim of grooming online.

Grooming may also occur online by people forming relationships with children and pretending to be their friend. They do this by finding out information about their potential victim and trying to establish the likelihood of the child telling. They try to find out as much as they can about the child's family and social networks and, if they think it is 'safe enough', will then try to isolate their victim and may use flattery and promises of gifts, or threats and intimidation in order to achieve some control.

"She was great. I felt I could talk with her about anything. It felt like she was my best friend. When I met her, 'she' turned out to be 'he' and was much older than me. He frightened and hurt me."

Thirteen year old boy who met his chatroom friend offline.

It is easy for 'groomers' to find child victims online. They generally use chatrooms which are focussed around young people's interests. They often pretend to be younger and may even change their gender. Many give a false physical description of themselves which may bear no resemblance to their real appearance – some send pictures of other people, pretending that it is them. Groomers may also seek out potential victims by looking through personal websites such as social networking sites mentioned earlier.

How is the grooming of children different online?

In many circumstances, grooming online is faster and anonymous and results in children trusting an online 'friend' more quickly than someone they had just met 'face to face'. Those intent on sexually harming children can easily access information about them and they are able to hide their true identity, age and gender. People who groom children may not be restricted by time or accessibility to a child as they would be in the 'real world'.

"I met him through a chatroom. He said he ran a model agency and needed more models. He got me to send pictures of myself and told me I was beautiful. It all happened so quickly. I was really excited. It felt like I'd known him for ages and we fixed to meet up. I'm just so glad I took my friend with me because it turned out that he wasn't who he said he was – he yelled at me for bringing my friend and then just left us."

14 year old groomed through a chatroom.

How can we prevent our children being sexually abused online?

It is difficult for children to talk about being sexually abused, whether by a man or woman or by another child. Many tell no one, until they become adults themselves and many adults never tell anyone about their childhood abuse.

We have learnt that communication through the internet and mobile phones tends to make people less wary about what they say and do. This seems to add another barrier to children feeling able to let someone know if they are worried about their friendships online or someone's behaviour towards them.

Signs that a child or young person may be the target of sexual abuse online include:

- Spending increasing amounts of time on the internet.
- Becoming increasingly secretive – particularly around their use of the new technology.
- Shutting the door and hiding what they have on screen when someone enters the room.
- Not being able to talk openly about their activity online.
- Becoming possessive of their mobile phone and concerned if someone else picks it up and wants to look at it.
- Agitated behaviour when answering their mobile and needing to take the call in private.
- Developing a pattern of leaving the family home for periods of time with no explanation about where they are going.
- Vague talk of a new friend but offering no further information.
- Spending increasing amounts of time talking secretly with the new friend online.
- Not wanting to be alone with a particular adult or young person.
- Sudden, unexplained personality changes and mood swings.
- Outbursts of anger and irritation.
- Self harm.

Some of these behaviours may be part of growing up or caused by other factors in a child's life. If you are worried, talk to someone you trust or ring the **Stop it Now! Helpline.**

How can we keep our children safe when they are using the new technologies?

FREEPHONE HELPLINE 0808 1000 900

Children and young people are taught to use computers at an early age both at home and in school settings. For some, their knowledge and understanding of how the new technologies work may be greater than that of their parents and carers. This can sometimes leave us feeling unsure of how to monitor our children's safe use of the technology.

When our children are young, we have more control over their activities but as they grow into adolescence, with their need for privacy and freedom, this control lessens.

"When my daughter told me she'd been using her blog on the internet I hadn't got a clue what she was talking about. It was a wake up call for me. I realised that I needed to learn far more about young people's behaviour online."

Mother of a fourteen
year old girl

Often we have the difficult task of allowing our children to have more independence as they grow older whilst minimising any risks that we may foresee. It is important that we, as parents and carers, understand enough about the new technologies in order to keep our children safe from harm and enable them to use these technologies positively and responsibly. Children need to be just as aware of the dangers online as they are of those in their home, school or social settings.

"I didn't even know how to turn the computer on let alone how I could protect my son. He's now been convicted for looking at child pornography and will carry the label of sex offender for the rest of his life. I feel so responsible for all this."

Mother of a fourteen
year old boy.
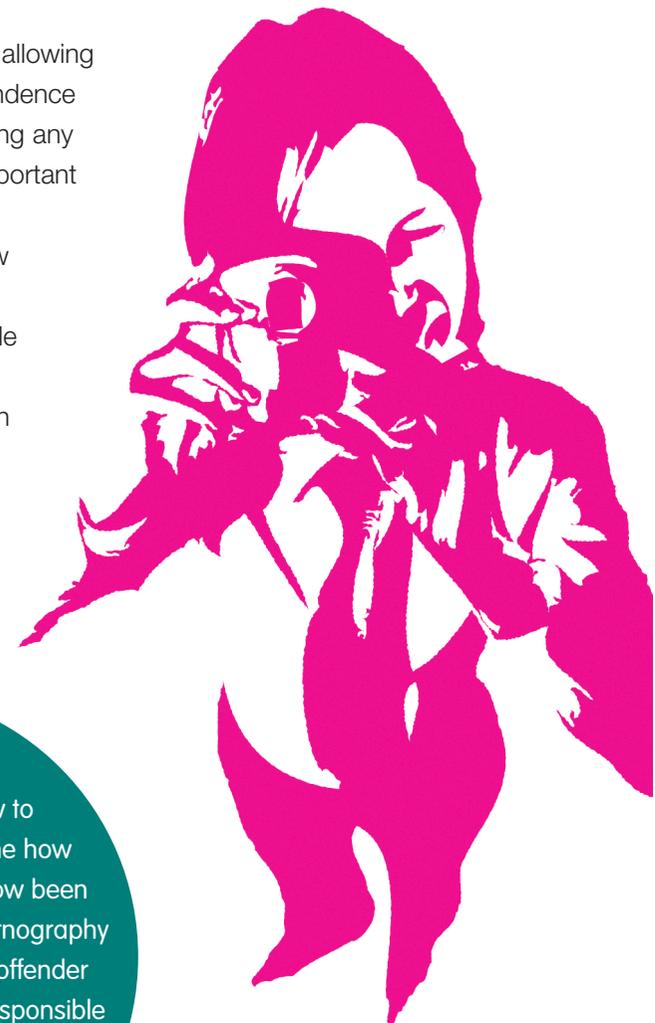
Top ten tips to help your children keep safe online

- When buying a computer, ask a sales assistant which internet safety devices are available to help manage your child's internet access. Install software that can filter inappropriate material and allows you to monitor what your children are doing online.

- When your children are young, place the computer where you can always see the screen. By doing this, you will help them develop a pattern of safe use of the internet which may safeguard them when they get older and want more privacy online.

- Help your children to enjoy their time on the internet but also encourage offline activity, for example – playing with their friends, participating in family activities and developing hobbies.

- Teach them not to give out personal information about themselves such as their name, address, telephone number, where they live or which school they go to. If they're signing up for email, chat or on a website, get them to use a nickname and make sure that it's one that does not identify their year/date of birth or have sexual connotations.

- Teach them not to give out personal information about their family or friends.

- Talk to them about the need to be careful of 'friends' online because they might not be who they say they are.

- Be open – take an interest in their internet use and talk to them about what they've seen just as you might talk to them about a book they've read or a film they've viewed.

- Educate your children to use the internet wisely and to become critical users, encourage them to question whether the information they are receiving from people is true.

- Let them know that they can tell you if they become uncomfortable with anything that happens on the internet and acknowledge that it may be difficult for them to do this. They may have said things they are embarrassed about and wouldn't want you to know. Help them learn that we all make mistakes when growing up and that you can help.

- Ensure your children understand the danger of meeting up with someone they have only met online whether that person says they are a man, woman or child and that they should never go on their own.

- Add helpful websites like CEOP, Childnet and IWF to 'favourites', so children can find them easily. (see end of leaflet for contact details)

How can we recognise that someone may be using the new technologies to harm children?

Teach your children the Childnet SMART rules

Teach your children the five key Childnet SMART rules which remind young people to be SMART online. It can be helpful to go through these tips with your children.

S – SAFE	Keep safe by being careful not to give out personal information – such as your name, email, phone number, home address, or school name – to people who you don't trust online.
M – MEETING	Meeting someone you have only been in touch with online can be dangerous. Only do so with your parents'/carers' permissions & when they can be present.
A – ACCEPTING	Accepting e-mails, IM messages or opening files from people you don't know or trust can get you into trouble – they may contain viruses or nasty messages.
R – RELIABLE	Someone online may be lying about who they are, and information you find on the internet may not be reliable.
T – TELL	Your parent, carer or a trusted adult if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried.

It is important that we are able to recognise the warning signs that someone we know may be using the new technologies inappropriately and to assist them in seeking help. It is not only adults who may harm children via the internet. Some young people use the new technologies to harm other children. Because they are able to create their own content via mobile phones and social networking sites, some young people create their own illegal and inappropriate material, sometimes unwittingly, which puts themselves and others more at risk.

What to do if you have concerns about someone's behaviour online

There may be cause for concern about the behaviour of someone if they:

- Start to spend increasing amounts of time on the internet and become preoccupied with it.
- Need to be online so frequently that it starts to impact on their family and/or work life.
- Become emotionally distant and less available.
- Withdraw from usual family and social activities.
- Become secretive about their online activity, shutting the door of the room where they are using the computer and changing the screen if someone enters the room.
- Regularly make plausible excuses for needing to work online.
- Increase their viewing of adult pornography.
- Regularly use the internet late at night.
- Make promises not to go online so frequently, then break them.
- Change their sexual attitudes and preferences.
- Hide traces of their online activity and storage of files.
- Use the new technologies with children whilst excluding other adults.
- Meet up with children, young people and/or adults in real life who they have initially met online.

All of these behaviours may have legitimate explanations and be caused by other factors in a person's life or they may be inappropriate for other reasons. If you are worried, talk to someone you trust or call the **Stop it Now! Helpline.**

If we are worried that someone is using the new technologies in a way that may be harmful to children, we need to take some action. It is very disturbing to suspect someone we know may be looking at abusive images of children and/or sexually abusing a child, especially if the person is a friend or member of our family. We want to dismiss such thoughts and put them down to imagination. But it is better to talk over the situation with someone than to discover later that we were right to be worried.

"I'm blaming myself for not being stronger. I knew in my guts that something wasn't right. He was spending more and more time late in the evening on the internet. I asked him what he was doing and he said he was looking for information for a project he was leading up at work. I got fed up and just started going to bed on my own. If only I'd pursued my worries, perhaps things would have turned out differently."

Wife of a man arrested for grooming young people through chatrooms.

Thousands of people every year discover that someone in their family or a friend has sexually harmed a child. Children who are abused and their families need help to recover from their experiences and people who are sexually harmful to children need help to stop such behaviour. This is a difficult process for all involved, but support is available for both victims and offenders and it may be the best way to prevent further harm.

Finally, men, women and young people who are using the new technologies because of a sexual interest in children and/or to sexually abuse them need to seek help. If any of this sounds like you, help and advice are available. Many people who phone our Helpline do so because they are concerned about their online behaviour and want help in stopping it.

Take this step now – phone for help.

"He seemed such a nice bloke – and was popular amongst the staff. It's difficult to take on board that he's been arrested for looking at child pornography…What made him want to do it? After all, he's got a lovely wife and daughter."

Female colleague of a man arrested for downloading/making abusive images of children.

An example of a Stop it Now Helpline call

Clive phoned our Helpline because he had just been arrested by the local police who were investigating allegations of child pornography offences. He told us that he knew that they would find what they were looking for and that his wife was in a state of shock. He said "I feel as if my life has fallen apart and I'm utterly ashamed of myself". Clive was tearful and didn't know if he could ever face the world again.

He was encouraged to maintain discussions with his wife and grown up children and to seek someone outside his immediate family to talk to, He was also advised to avoid involvement with the internet for the immediate future and to consult his GP if he felt he needed help. Stop it Now! arranged for both Clive and his wife to attend separate groups which provide education programmes for family members of internet offenders and for offenders themselves.

If, on reading this leaflet, you have concerns about yourself or someone you know or if you suspect that a child you know is being abused, act now! Action can lead to abuse being prevented and children being protected. It can also lead to the abuser getting effective treatment to stop the abusive behaviour and to become a safer member of our community.

"I never considered the effect it would have on my wife and kids…only that the police would probably call one day."

An internet offender.

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Where to go for advice or help about protecting children online

To report concerns about a child or young person's safety online

- **Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP)** – The Centre provides a single point of contact for the public, law enforcers and the communications industry to report targeting of children online and offers advice and information to parents and potential victims of abuse 24 hours a day. The site also allows internet users to make reports about suspicious online behaviour to law enforcement agencies.
  www.ceop.gov.uk

- **Internet Watch Foundation (IWF)** – A charity established to combat child abuse images online, it provides a mechanism for the public to report suspected illegal content.
  www.iwf.org.uk

To seek confidential advice regarding harmful sexual behaviour online

- **Stop it Now! Helpline** – A Helpline which gives advice to adults concerned about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards children.
  0808 1000 900   help@stopitnow.org.uk   www.stopitnow.org.uk

To find safety information

- **Childnet International** – A non-profit organisation working with others to "help make the internet a great and safe place for children". Its website gives news and background to Childnet's work and serves as a portal to Childnet's award-winning projects.
  http://www.childnet-int.org/

- **Department for Education and Skills (DfES)** – Provides advice and information on all aspects of internet safety for schools and LEAs.
  www.safety.ngfl.gov.uk/schools/

- **Get Safe Online** – An initiative sponsored by government and leading businesses. It provides expert advice to protect everyone against internet threats.
  www.getsafeonline.com

Internet jargon buster

Administrator
A user with sufficient access rights to allow them to manage the access rights of other users and carry out other high-level computer management tasks.

Authentication
The process for verifying that someone or something is who or what it claims to be. In private and public computer networks (including the internet), authentication is generally done with passwords.

Blog
A 'blog' is short for Web log or online journal. Some websites are particularly appealing to young people because they make it extremely easy for them to create blogs, multimedia profiles and other Web content. (See social networks page 9)

Broadband
Broadband connections to the internet differ from dial-up connections in two ways. First, they are much faster and permanently connected; second, they allow you to make telephone calls whilst you're surfing the internet. Examples of broadband connections include ADSL, cable modem and fibre-optic leased lines.

Browser
A program that lets users read and navigate pages on the World Wide Web, such as Mozilla Firefox or Microsoft Internet Explorer.

Chat rooms
An online discussion group where you can chat (by typing) with other users in real time.

Cookie
A small data file that is stored on a user's local computer for record-keeping purposes and which contains information about the user that is applicable to a Web site, such as user preferences.

Download

To transfer a copy of a file from a remote computer to a requesting computer by means of a modem or network.

Email filter

Software that scans incoming email for spam or other unwanted material and filters it accordingly.

File sharing

Making files available over the internet to other users, typically music or video files.

Filter

A program designed to monitor what is being loaded into a Web browser or email program and blocks certain types of material.

Firewall

Hardware or software designed to prevent unauthorised access to a computer or network over the internet.

Grooming

Grooming is a word used to describe how people who want to sexually harm children and young people get close to them, and often their families, and gain their trust. Grooming occurs online by people forming relationships with children and pretending to be their friend. Such grooming activity may result in meeting a child with the intention of committing a sexual offence.

Instant Messaging (IM)

Sending short text messages in real time over the internet.

Internet Service Provider (ISP)

A company providing a connection to the internet and other related services.

MP3

MPEG-1 Audio Layer-3 is a standard for compressing and storing sound files, typically for music.

Peer-to-peer (P2P)

A network in which each computer is capable of being both a server and a client; typically used to share music files over the internet.

Social networking sites

These are places where people create a personalised page on the web related to their interests and views which links with other users with similar views and develops an online, ever increasing, social network.

Pop-up

A small window that appears over a web page to display an advertisement.

User account

A set of rules defining access to files and systems on a computer that is personal to a given individual.

Username

A code name that, with a password, unlocks a user account.

Webcam

A digital camera that can transmit images over the internet to users who access a given webpage.

Action you can take

Contact the Stop it Now! Helpline Freephone 0808 1000 900.

If you are unsure or worried about your own thoughts or behaviour towards children, or the behaviour of someone you know, whether they are an adult, a young person or a child, our experienced advisors will talk over your worries with you and can offer confidential advice on what steps you could take.

OR

Contact your local Police and social services.

The police and social services have joint working arrangements for responding to suspected child sexual abuse. Someone will talk to you about your concerns and may ask for details so the situation can be investigated further. Police and social services teams are very experienced in this work and will deal sensitively with the child and family. Remember, child sexual abuse is a crime and abusers may need to go to court before the abuse stops and they and the child get the help they need.

Our children are our future and all of us have a responsibility to protect them. Take action. Call Stop it Now! for further advice.

Other leaflets available from Stop it Now! UK and Ireland.

Stop it Now!

This leaflet introduces the Stop it Now! campaign and describes what Stop it Now! is doing to prevent child sexual abuse.
(Ref Stop 01)

What we all need to know to Protect Our Children

This leaflet provides the information we all need in order to recognise the warning signs of abuse in adults we know and to build the confidence to do something about it.
(Ref Stop 02)

Childs Play? Preventing abuse among children and young people

This leaflet provides the information we all need in order to recognise the warning signs of sexually harmful behaviour in children and to build the confidence to do something about it.
(Ref Stop 03)

The Stop it Now! UK & Ireland Helpline Report

This report covers the first three years (2002 – 2005) of Helpline activity.

To request copies of these publications, contact the Stop it Now! Administrator Telephone: 01527 598 184   E-mail: office@stopitnow.org.uk