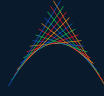




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JOINT POLICING CYBERCRIME COORDINATION CENTRE



Australian
Centre to Counter
Child Exploitation

Sadistic Online Exploitation

Content warning: This document covers topics including online child sexual exploitation, self-harm and suicide, which may be distressing to readers.

Sadistic online exploitation (SOE) is the deliberate and malicious use of the internet to harm, manipulate or exert control over others for:

- Personal pleasure or gratification
- Power and control
- Ideological beliefs
- Corruption of victims to inflict ongoing harm

This will often incorporate alternative forms of psychological, emotional or physical abuse through digital means. Offenders from violent online groups use threats, blackmail and online manipulation to coerce victims into producing, sharing or live streaming acts of self-harm, animal cruelty, sexually explicit acts and in the most serious cases, suicide.

SOE offending often overlaps with these crime types:

- Child sexual exploitation
- Cybercrime
- Violent extremism

SOE is closely aligned with nihilistic violent extremism rather than more common forms of online child sexual exploitation which typically involves offenders seeking financial or sexual gratification through victimisation. Nihilistic violent extremism is characterised by a rejection of all societal, moral and political norms, often rooted in the belief that life lacks meaning.

This shift undermines traditional prevention and detection methods, as the offenders' motives are unpredictable and lack a negotiable agenda.

Who is most at risk

While any child or young person can be victimised online, certain groups remain disproportionately represented in cases known to law enforcement.

Age and demographics:

Females aged 10-18.

Potential vulnerabilities:

- **Low self-esteem or a reduced sense of self-worth:** These feelings can make some young people more likely to tolerate poor treatment in order to feel connected or accepted.
- **Social isolation:** Feelings of loneliness, exclusion, or isolation may lead young people to seek friendships, validation, or support online, where risks can be harder to recognise.
- **Marginalised identities:** Young people with marginalised identities, including those related to gender, sexuality, race, or disability, may be more likely to turn to online spaces to find community or understanding, which can increase vulnerability if boundaries are not respected.
- **Approval seeking:** A strong need for approval, validation, belonging, or connection can make some individuals more compliant with requests that are uncomfortable, humiliating, or harmful.
- **Fear of rejection:** A fear of rejection or being excluded can lead young people to endure cruelty, pressure, or disrespect to avoid being shamed, ridiculed, or left out.
- **Neurodivergence or mental health challenges:** These can make it more difficult to recognise unsafe intentions, set or maintain boundaries, or identify coercion and manipulation.
- **A history of self-harm or abuse:** A history of self-harm, eating disorders, trauma, or abuse can increase vulnerability, particularly where past experiences and online interactions reinforce harmful beliefs about self-worth, control, or approval, or where a lack of safe role models and healthy relationships has made harmful behaviour seem normal or expected.

These vulnerabilities are sometimes compounded by situational or environmental factors such as disengagement from family, school, peers or limited access to trusted adults, periods of high stress or economic disadvantage increasing their susceptibility to the influence or manipulation of others.

Offenders exploit these vulnerabilities by creating a false sense of acceptance or belonging, often posing as a friend or romantic interest, even offering money or gifts. This dynamic can disguise the controlling and abusive nature of the relationship to prevent victims from seeking help.

Barriers to a child or young person seeking help are significant. Victims may feel shame, fear getting in trouble, or face threats from the offender including the sharing of personal information or content as well as doxxing and swatting.

Offender profile

Age and demographics:

Identified offenders are predominately male, with a median age of 20 and based in English-speaking nations.

There is a higher representation of neurodivergence among identified offenders. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), depression, and social anxiety are common. These factors are not causal, but like the victims, these factors increase susceptibility to immersion in extremist communities and manipulation.

Connection to online communities:

Offenders operate within dedicated violent online groups, who engage in cybercrime, child sexual exploitation, violent extremism and SOE.

Motivations vary, can overlap, and include:

- Treating cruelty as a form of entertainment, engaging in malicious online behaviours such as sharing offensive memes, humiliating or coercing others into committing harmful acts and doxxing.
- Acting out of personal humiliation or rejection, often driven by a distorted sense of justice, revenge and a desire for control or validation by targeting vulnerable groups.
- Uses extremist beliefs like racism / white extremism or misogyny to justify cruel behaviour, taking pleasure in dominating or harming outsiders, and may spread propaganda that mocks victims to reinforce their ideology.
- Gains sexual gratification from online humiliation or coercion of others (sextortion, forced acts) and uses technology to exploit, manipulate and degrade.
- Motivated by directing group cruelty and are skilled at manipulation and rallying others to join and inflict harm. These offenders seek control, dominance and status within extremist networks.
- Production and exchange of violent or sexually explicit material as a form of verification of their manipulation skills.

Some individuals engaging in offending behaviours may themselves be victims, having been coerced or manipulated into offending. Most are young males immersed in online cultures driven by feelings of resentment or a desire to assert control. A minority of women and older adults appear, but usually in more specific roles such as facilitators or organisers.

Offender tactics: A SOE 'relationship'



How it starts

Offenders initiate contact with vulnerable children and young people via common platforms such as gaming sites, social media and messaging apps.

Their intention is to establish a 'relationship', building a false sense of friendship or romance, offering acceptance, connection or belonging.



How it progresses

- **Desensitisation and grooming:** Offenders introduce extreme or sexualised content into conversations to normalise them and wearing a potential victim down through constant messaging, pressuring them to give in.
- **Isolation:** Victims are encouraged to withdraw from family, friends and school supports.
- **Escalation:** Demands become more extreme over time escalating from self-produced nude or sexual images and videos, to acts of self-harm, food restriction, animal cruelty, violence against others such as the sexual abuse or violence against other children such as siblings, or suicide.
- **Threats and control:** Offenders can blackmail their victims into producing content by threatening to expose their sexualised conversations or content or personal identifiable information publicly. Alternatively, offenders exploit the false sense of loyalty they have created, manipulating victims into feeling obligated or believing they are willingly taking part in the abuse. These tactics help to maintain control and dominance over the victim.

Offenders share and trade this material within other violent online groups for notoriety, social capital, praise or gratification. They entrap victims in a cycle of dependency, shame and fear, preventing them from recognising the abuse or seeking help.

What to look out for



Adults working with children and young people may be the first to observe changes in a child or young person's behaviour which could be indicative of their abuse, as victims rarely self-identify. Early recognition and intervention can prevent the abuse from escalating into more extreme, violent or life-threatening behaviours.

If a child or young person you know exhibits any of the below behaviours, there may be a need for further investigation:

- ▶ Self-harm indicators such as cuts, carvings of symbols (cut signs) on their skin, bite marks and burns.
- ▶ Changes in eating or sleeping habits and excessive tiredness.
- ▶ Sudden withdrawal or isolation from family, friend circles, or abandoning long-term friends for new online-focused groups.
- ▶ Changes in mood like heightened anxiety, nervousness or low self-esteem. Frequent self-putdowns, saying things like "I'm useless/stupid".
- ▶ Escalating secrecy such as hiding phone or online behaviour, switching screens quickly when approached, excessive device attachment and panic or refusal to be separated from phone or laptop.
- ▶ Shame or sudden distress when asked about online life.
- ▶ Use of extreme language, cruel humour, symbols, and rejection of previously held morals.
- ▶ Overly eager to please or follow others going along with peers' requests even when they feel uncomfortable.
- ▶ Writing in blood or what appears to be blood (blood signing).
- ▶ Over-sharing online experiences where they openly discuss online 'friends', or communities.
- ▶ Engagement in specific online and offline behaviours such as the use of anonymous or extreme platforms or forums, unmoderated chats, taking part in online humiliation, dangerous stunts or harmful sexual behaviours.
- ▶ Openly talking about death, not being wanted.
- ▶ Suicide attempts.

Tips for adults to support children and young people



If a child or young person you know makes a disclosure indicating they may be a victim of SOE please consider the below tips.

- ✓ **Initiate a conversation:** Ask them what is happening. All children and young people need to know it is safe to disclose to a trusted person.
- ✓ **Stay calm and open:** Children and young people may be scared, feel isolated or ashamed. They may be fearful of being punished. Provide a safe environment where children and young people feel supported to disclose concerns and maintain a calm and open demeanour to help them feel supported.
- ✓ **Validate feelings:** Reassure children and young people it is normal to feel upset, anxious or confused after being exposed to harmful interactions and content.
- ✓ **Keep routines steady:** Regular school, sleep and activity create a sense of stability.
- ✓ **Limit exposure:** Encourage breaks from online platforms if children or young people feel overwhelmed and support and encourage healthy offline activities.
- ✓ **Use reporting tools:** Rely on your mandatory reporting process' like organisation or department based in-app tools and report to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) website at www.accce.gov.au. Offer guidance on how to record evidence safely (screenshots, dates/times, usernames).
- ✓ **Seek professional help:** If ongoing distress is observed, consider engaging allied health services such as a child psychologist or organisations that can provide direct support to the child such as, Headspace, Kids Helpline and Lifeline. Parents and carers could consider engaging legal services if they have any questions or concerns regarding the outcome of an incident if a report needs to be made.
- ✓ **Encourage reengagement:** Children and young people who are isolated or disengaged can benefit from reconnecting with school, friends or community groups as it helps reduce feelings of disengagement, rebuilds trust in others and provides safe opportunities for belonging. Being part of positive environments such as clubs or school peer groups can promote healthy routines, increase protective factors, and support resilience.

Where to report

If a child is in immediate danger, call Triple Zero (000)

For non-emergency situations that still require a timely response, contact your local police station or call 131 444.

- Ensure you adhere to your mandatory reporting obligations.
- You should report SOE and any form of online child sexual exploitation via the Report Abuse Button on the ACCCE website (www.accce.gov.au)
- If you encounter a description or depiction of child abuse online or other offensive and illegal content, you can report it to the eSafety Commissioner (www.esafety.gov.au/report) who notify law enforcement and work to remove this content that is hosted in Australia and overseas.
- If you come across illegal content such as child abuse material on social media, you should report this directly to the platform.

Support services

If you, or someone you know, needs support, reach out to these confidential Australian services:

Headspace | 1800 650 890 | www.headspace.org.au

Kids Helpline | 1800 55 1800 | www.kidshelpline.com.au

Lifeline | 13 11 14 | www.lifeline.org.au

QLife | 1800 184 527 | [www.qlife.org.au](http://www qlife.org.au)

For a list of specialised support services, visit www.accce.gov.au/help-and-support/who-can-help

