

Sexual communication with children online

Objectives

This module aims to help you explore and gain understanding of:

- Your motivation for engaging sexually with children online
 - How your behaviour progressed into sexual communication
 - How you might have justified your behaviour
-

What do we mean by ‘sexual communication’?

Following new legislation in April 2017 in England and Wales (and existing legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland), an adult is committing a criminal offence if they intentionally communicate with someone under the age of 16 for the purposes of sexual gratification.

Sexual communication with a child is often referred to as online grooming. It can take many forms and with different motivations. All forms are regarded as child sexual abuse. They are illegal and cause harm.

Some people communicate sexually with a child or children online because they find it sexually arousing. Other people do so in order to persuade children to send them sexual images or videos of themselves. Some people communicate sexually with children online because they want to meet the child offline in order to sexually interact with them. These behaviours can overlap, so that it's not always clear at the outset what someone really wants from their sexual communication.

People's behaviour varies too. For example, many people engaging in this behaviour report having sexual contact with lots of children online, and sending sexual pictures of themselves to the children, too. Other people may communicate sexually with only one child.

Some introduce the topic of sex very quickly, whereas others will engage in ‘grooming behaviours’, where they spend time building rapport and establishing trust with a child before the issue of sex is raised.

Below are some examples of people who have engaged in sexual communication with children online, which show the different aspect of the behaviour.

Asmir

Asmir is married, in his late 40s, and has three children aged 7-12. Until recently he was working in a stressful job as a manager in the hospitality industry. He has viewed adult pornography, on and off, ever since he was a teenager. In recent years he has started to use adult chat rooms as a sexual outlet, and, on occasions, he has engaged with teenage girls via webcam i.e. encouraged them to masturbate on camera and exposed himself to them. He has never attempted to meet up with any adults or children offline, and has had no interest in doing so. For Asmir, his sexual interactions with adults and teenage girls online were a way for him to use sex to de-stress in the evenings when the rest of his family were asleep.

Ben

Ben is a gay man in his 30s. He has no children and works in financial services. He has a limited history of adult relationships and has not been in a relationship for some years, about which he has felt frustrated and anxious. In recent months, using various social media platforms, he set up a fake profile of a teenage girl. Using this profile, he then contacted teenage boys online and, over time, would start to talk to the boys about their sexual behaviour, fantasies and so on. Ben made no attempt to meet the boys offline – after all, he was pretending to be a teenage girl. Ben found these sexual conversations with boys arousing and he also enjoyed the challenge of getting the boys to talk about their sexual behaviour.

Rob

Rob is in his mid-40s and works at his local supermarket. He lives alone and has only had one relationship in his life, which ended many years ago when his partner was unfaithful to him with one of his friends. Rob has been wary of meeting anyone new ever since. However, over the last 3 years, through social media, he started to chat to others online. Rob wasn't looking to get into a relationship and enjoyed talking to a wide range of people. He especially liked to give support to young people who were struggling with their mental health, as he felt like he had relevant experiences he could share. Over time, he became close to a 15-year-old girl called Claire, who was experiencing bullying at school. Rob and Claire spent a lot of time talking via a messaging platform, especially in the evenings. After some months, Rob felt that he had fallen in love with Claire. He shared his feelings with her, and said that he felt they were meant to be together as a couple. To his delight, and relief, Claire said that she felt the same, and they agreed to go away for a weekend, in secret.

John

John is aged 28. He lives in a house-share and works as a software developer. He has always viewed adult pornography and has had a lot of sexual partners in recent years. John enjoys partying, and uses recreational drugs most weekends. He feels like he's too young to settle down, and sex is an important part of his lifestyle. John has various profiles on numerous dating Apps and social media platforms, which he uses to find new sexual partners and/or to engage in cybersex. John is most attracted to women aged 18-24 but knows that some of the girls he has chatted to online have been as young as 14. Some weeks ago, he also met up with a girl, who he now thinks was under-age, and had sex with her in a hotel.

Considering these examples, did you recognise any of your own behaviours? Were you able to relate to any aspects of the person's situation?

Motivations for engaging in sexual communication with children

Some people tell us that their interaction with children was not only motivated by sex. Instead some people talk about wanting to feel understood, or enjoying the connection with the child they are speaking to.

Our experience is that people's motivations are often about more things than simply sexual pleasure. As such, it is important to considering your motives, so that you are able to manage your behaviour more responsibly in the future.

Many of the motivations noted in the [Understanding Why module](#) will also be relevant for people who have communicated sexually with children online. Take a look and see which might have been significant for you. You might find it helpful to complete the timeline exercise, if you haven't done so already.

Different groups

Research and practice concerning the online grooming of children is relatively new. We are therefore still learning about this behaviour, and the people who engage in it. Some researchers have suggested that people who sexually abuse children in this way fall into different groups, depending on their motives and behaviour.

The European Online Grooming Project (Webster et al., 2012) proposes three broad groups:

- People who want to feel close to a child – 'intimacy seeking'
- People who adapt and change their online behaviour and profiles depending on the response of the child they are chatting to – 'adaptable'
- People who act in a very sexual way from the outset – 'hypersexual'

The difference between these groups, in terms of their online behaviour, is mainly about the intensity and duration of the online communication between the adult and the child. The motivations, however, may differ.

Exercise 1: Different approaches to children

With the above ideas about different groupings in mind, think about the following questions. Also consider if your behaviour changed over time, and why that might have been:

- Did you think about your contact with a child or children as being consenting and intimate?
- Were your conversations prolonged and frequent with sexual content introduced slowly?
- Did your online conversations often lead to planning or arranging offline meetings to develop the relationship?
- Did your online conversations lead to the sending and/or receiving of sexual images?
- Did you see the children you spoke to as mature and sexually knowledgeable?
- Did you change your style of communication depending on the child you spoke to, and how they responded?
- Did you introduce sexual content very quickly i.e. within seconds or the first few minutes?
- Did you use a false identity?
- Did you try to develop a relationship with a particular child or children?
- Did you use sexual chat for your immediate sexual pleasure?

What do your answers to the above questions, tell you about your motivations?

What do they say about how you viewed the child or children you chatted to?

And what was the likelihood of you meeting up with a child you had chatted to online? What stopped you?

Sexual communication with children online

The different stages of sexual communication with children

In order to understand more about how to avoid situations which may lead to you communicating sexually with a child in the future, it can be helpful to break the process down into different stages, like those suggested below, based upon the work by Rachel O'Connell. We can consider each of these stages using one of the examples earlier, Rob:

- Friendship forming stage – *Rob would provide support to young people who were struggling.*
 - Relationship forming stage – *Rob continued this contact with Claire and communicated that he had feelings for her.*
 - Avoiding detection stage – *The messaging between Rob and Claire took place mostly in the evening. There was also a secret meeting planned.*
 - Sexual behaviour stage – *An arrangement was made to meet, which could have resulted in Rob committing a contact sexual offence against Claire.*
-

Exercise 2: My different stages

To change behaviour, it's important to recognise and understand the patterns in past behaviour. This can help us know the signs of the behaviour repeating itself and help us think about how we can change for the better.

Thinking about your online behaviour, what examples can you identify for each stage?

Remember that not every stage will be relevant for everyone. For example, some people do not try to make friends with the child concerned, or to form a relationship with them. But other people do. The difference often says a lot about people's motivations. You can download this exercise [here](#).

Stages	My own behaviours
Friendship forming	
Relationship forming	
Avoiding detection	
Sexual behaviour	

Sexual communication with children online

The cycle of online grooming

Some people find it more helpful to think of their behaviour as following a repeated pattern rather than, for example, the stages set out above. As with the stages above, considering your behaviour patterns can help you to understand the form your behaviour took, and the factors involved in your decision making. This will put you in a position where you can recognise this and change your behaviour so it is not repeated in the future.

The cycle below is based on the work of de Santisteban et al (2018). Just like with the stages above, how a person moves through the cycle will be unique to them, and is likely to have changed over time as their behaviour developed. Not every stage will apply to everyone.

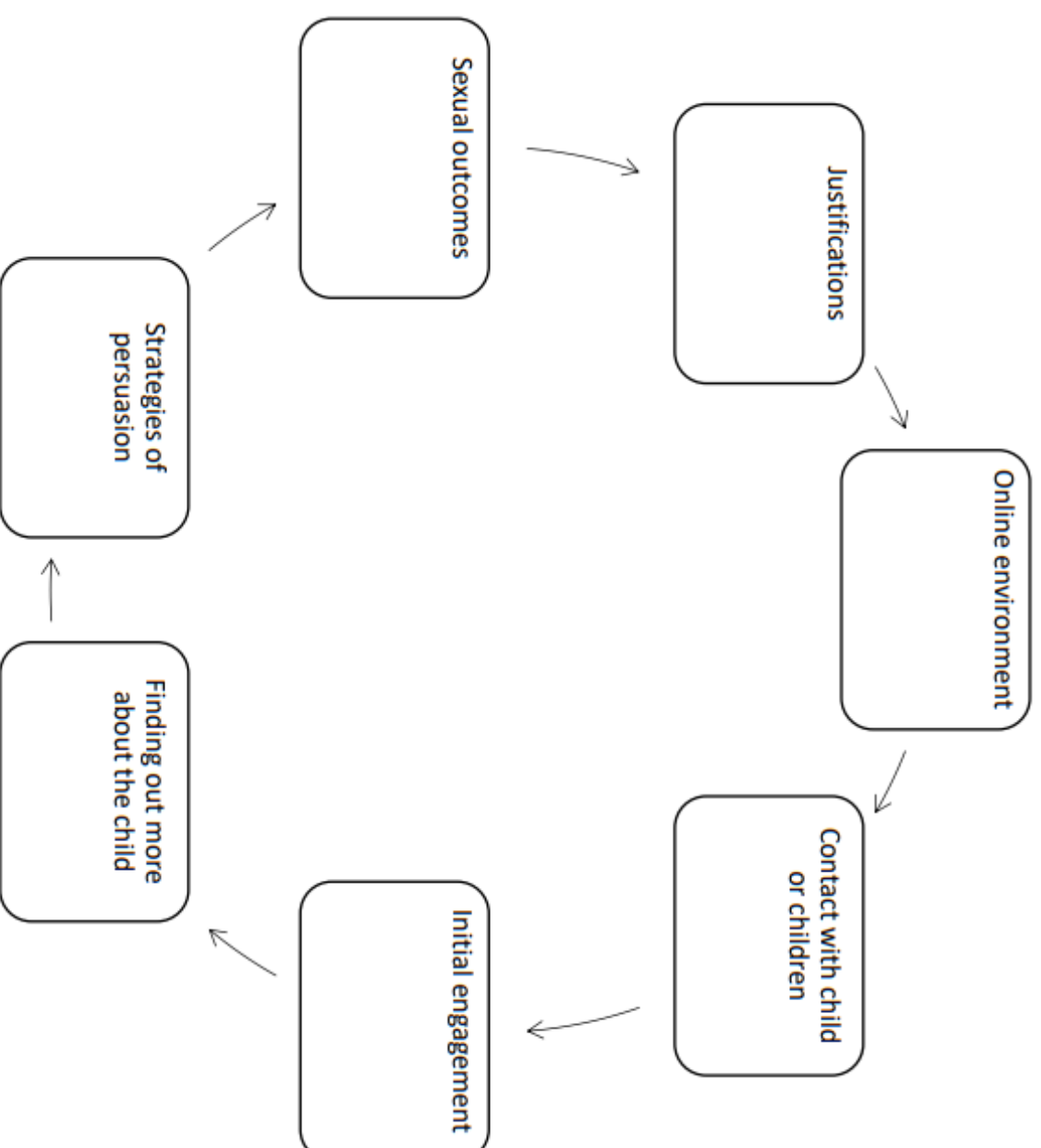
Exercise 3: Cycle of online grooming

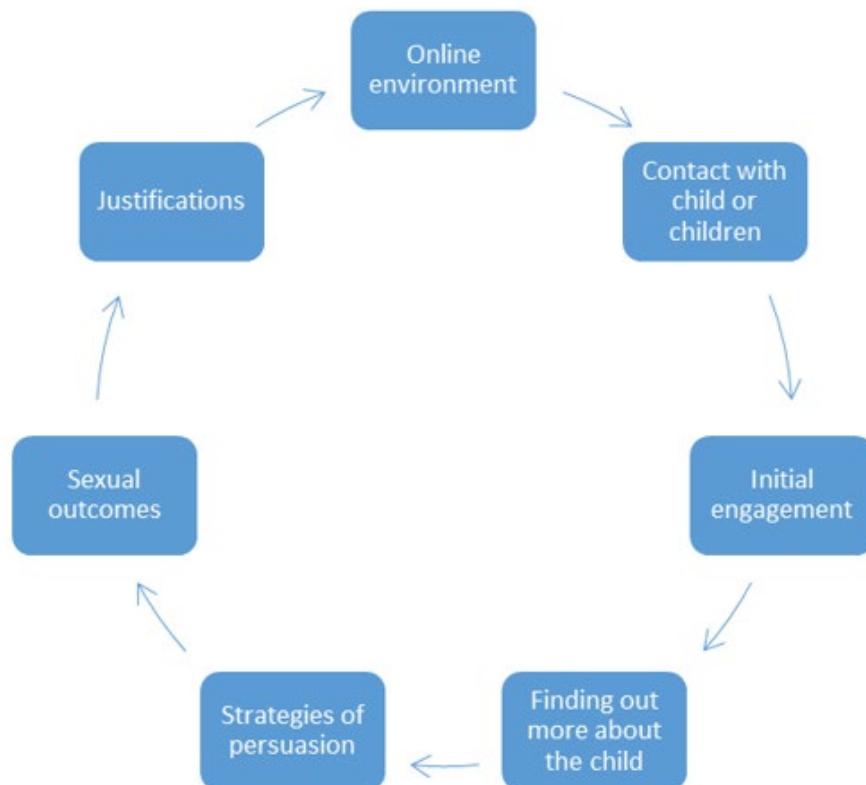
Look at the cycle below and think about how each stage might have applied to your online sexual behaviour towards a particular child or children, in general. You might also find it useful to consider one of the examples from earlier and how this person might apply to the cycle.

As you do this exercise, think about how your behaviour changed over time. Which stages of the cycle were most relevant for you? How has your thinking changed? How did the sexual communication arise? What do you think of your old justifications now?

Click on the stages of the cycle below for a full description of each stage.

Exercise 3: Cycle of online grooming





The online environment

As well as ideas like the Triple A model, this is about how people perceive the internet as a place where they can express themselves sexually more openly. For example, some people might feel more confident talking to adults and/or children about sex online than offline. Or they might feel that they can portray themselves with more confidence or as being more attractive etc.

To read more about the Triple A model, and consider these aspects of the internet, you might find it useful to look at the [Online World module](#).

Contact with child or children

This is about how people make their initial contact with children online.

Initial engagement

Although persuasion may occur throughout someone's contact with children, we know that people can engage a child or children in conversation, for example, by the use of a false profile, by using the language of children or adolescents.

Finding out more about the child

Having started the initial conversation, some adults may take an interest in other aspects of the child's life. This is about strengthening their relationship with the child.

Strategies of persuasion

This stage is about how someone might persuade a child to do what they want them to, such as to send sexual images or videos of themselves.

Sexual outcomes

This is the sexual behaviour itself, for example, the exchange of sexual videos and images; offline sexual contact; one-off sexual encounters; sustained sexual contact with the same child over time etc.

Justifications

These are the things people say to themselves to justify their behaviour and to feel OK about it. These might include:

- *blaming* the child – ‘s/he led me on!’
- *sexualising* the child – ‘s/he was so provocative’, ‘s/he was sexually active anyway’
- *desirability* - believing themselves to be attractive and desirable
- *equating* children to adults, for example, in terms of consent and understanding.

The idea is that these justifications then make it more likely that the person will carry on with their behaviour, and so go back round the cycle, perhaps many times.

It is important to recognise these justifications, so that you can challenge them in the future. Once you have identified some of the justifications you used, you could consider a response to dissuade yourself from engaging in the behaviour in the future.

Use the table below to consider your justifications at the time and responses now. You should repeat all the phrases you write in the “Responses” column in your head, so that this sort of thinking becomes automatic if you start to experience the justifications again.

Some examples are provided.

Justifications	Responses
<i>“S/he led me on.”</i>	<i>“They are a child. They are not able to consent to the sexual communication.”</i>
<i>“I’m only talking to them.”</i>	<i>“These conversation are still harmful to children”</i>
<i>“They could stop if they want to.”</i>	<i>“I’m the adult, it’s my responsibility to stop.”</i>

Responding to Justifications

[illegible]

Sexual communication with children online

Considering the child's perspective

Many people do not believe they are harming children when they communicate with them sexually on the internet. For example, do any of the following sound familiar?

- "The girl/boy I was talking to really could have stopped it at any time. I never threatened her/him."
- "S/He was usually the one to start chatting with me. I never pursued her/him."
- "I know I wasn't the first older man s/he'd had contact with. If she didn't like it the first time, s/he wouldn't have started chatting to me."

If you recognise using any of the above statements, it is important to think about the dynamics of your interaction or relationship with the children concerned. This can be really hard to do, as sometimes people feel ashamed of their behaviour when they look at it from the child's point of view. But, remember that this is a positive process, and considering the child's point of view can help you stay safe from inappropriate online behaviour going forward. Find a quiet time to do the exercise below when you're feeling safe and supported.

Exercise 4: The child's perspective

Consider what you know about the child/ren you were interacting with and what you know about children generally. Think about the following discussion questions:

- What might have made it difficult for them to say 'no'? (e.g. worry/anxiety, lack of assertiveness, fear of the person or losing the relationship)
- What needs could your contact with the child have been meeting for them? (e.g. perhaps they wanted attention as a result of an unhappy home life)
- What responsibilities do all adults have towards children?
- How does a child's understanding of sexual contact, its meaning and consequences, differ from the understanding of adults?
- How able is a child to give informed consent to any form of sexual contact? (e.g. does a child fully recognise the risks and consequences of sexual contact)
- How could your interaction with the child have made them believe they held some responsibility for the chat?

Reflections

- What do you think motivated you to communicate with children in a sexual way online?
- How did your behaviour develop over time?
- What stages can you identify in your behaviour?
- How did you persuade and/or encourage the child/ren to go along with it?