

Chapter Twelve

Abusive Images and Inappropriate Use of the Internet and Other Technology

- 12.1 This chapter focuses on the use of abusive images/materials as part of the sexual exploitation of children. The term 'abusive images' is used in preference to 'pornography' as the latter has associations with discussions about what is legal and whether the control of such images infringes rights. The provision, possession and distribution of abusive images of children is always illegal.
- 12.2 This is a subject about which knowledge is developing and research is providing new information and insights. This chapter sets out the state of knowledge of the issues when written and revised.
- 12.3 So far the following issues have been identified locally:
- access by children to inappropriate material
 - creation of and access to abusive images via the internet; and implications for the safety of children to whom such adults have access
 - use of chat rooms, mobile phones and developing technologies by abusers to make contact with children
 - the skills gap between children and their parents/carers in the use of technology
 - children and young people using the internet or other technologies to facilitate abuse
 - the effect on children of knowing that images of them being abused exist on the internet.

Creation of Abusive Images and Access to Abusive Images

- 12.4 There is increasing concern, not just nationally but world wide, about the use of the internet to abuse and exploit children. Computer technology, including web cams and mobile phones, is being used in the production and widespread distribution of images and pseudo images of the abuse of children, from babies to teenagers.
- 12.5 Access to abusive images is not a 'victimless' act, as it has already involved the abuse of a child and fuels the demand for the production of further images. While research in this area is developing, what is available would appear to suggest that there is a chance of adults accessing these type of images moving on to be 'hands on' abusers. There is evidence of offenders using abusive images from the Internet to overcome internal and external inhibitors and to fuel fantasies.
- 12.6 In the event that somebody is discovered to have placed abusive images on the internet, or accessed abusive images, the police child abuse investigation unit (CAIU) will be informed. A strategy meeting

should be held to include children's social care and the relevant sections of the police. The meeting will consider:

- whether the individual concerned is, or could be, involved in the active abuse of children
- whether he/she has access to children within family, work and social contexts
- what action should be taken in relation to the perpetrator(s) and any children to whom they have access

12.7 Where specific children are identified as abused in the production of images. A Section 47 enquiry should be carried out – **please refer to Chapter 5: Child Protection Enquiries.**

12.8 Where it becomes apparent that significant numbers of people are involved in creating or accessing abusive images, reference should be made to Chapter 15: Investigating Complex (Organised or Multiple) Abuse.

Use of Computer Technology to make contact with children

12.9 The internet can also be used to make contact with and 'groom' children. The anonymity of the internet allows adults (often pretending to be children) to have conversations, establish 'relationships' and, in some cases, arrange to meet children. This would suggest that a much wider group of children, arguably all those with access to the internet, are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

12.10 The best protection is to ensure that children are made aware of the dangers, share what they are doing online and are given clear, non-punitive advice about self-protection. There is much good advice available through web sites. These can readily be accessed and are publicised on the LSCB website – **www.lscb-llr.org.uk**.

12.11 Where information or suspicion arises that an adult has made inappropriate contact with a young person, the police should be informed. Legislation now recognises this behaviour as criminal behaviour which can be prosecuted.

12.12 Where there is evidence or suspicion that abuse has occurred, the child and his/her family should be offered an assessment under Section 17.

Access to Inappropriate Material

12.13 Exposure to abusive images whether on photographs, video, or other new technology or the Internet can, in itself, be abusive to children.

12.14 Children are naturally curious and may well come across such images by accident or through swapping information with friends.

12.15 The best means of protection is prevention. All schools, libraries and other sites where children may access the internet should have

procedures in place, including the use of software to minimise such access.

12.16 Children should also be encouraged to discuss openly their use of computer technology and anything, which makes them feel uncomfortable.

12.17 Where children are identified as persisting in such access, or compiling large collections of abusive images, consideration should be given to whether they may be at risk, or may present a risk to others, particularly as constant exposure to abusive images of children can be a significant factor in disinhibiting potential abusers.

Risk Assessment

12.18 As has been suggested, knowledge, based on experience and research of the incidence and implications of the use of abusive images, is developing. While there is already an extensive knowledge of the nature and extent of sexual abuse within communities, experience of widespread investigations has identified a wider range of 'vulnerable' children and a greater range of adults accessing abusive images. Investigations have identified numbers of professional staff accessing such images, who may have access to children through their occupations, as well as in their family lives.

12.19 In such cases a strategy meeting will identify the need for assessment of risk both in relation to the occupation and in relation to risk to any child within the family. The former will be the primary responsibility of the employing agency. In order to assess whether someone who has accessed abusive images presents a risk to children in their own family an assessment is needed. This will consider:

- the type of images, nature of abuse, age of children involved etc
- attitude of the offender, e.g. minimisation/justification/victim empathy
- capacity of the children to self protect
- attitude of other parent/carers and their capacity to protect the children

Please also refer to Chapter 13: Allegations of abuse made against a person who works with, or is in contact with, children in a work or care setting, including volunteers.

The Skills Gap

12.20 The fact that the knowledge and understanding of information technology in adults may be limited, particularly compared with that of children, can have a de-skilling effect on the adults involved in monitoring computer use or investigating concerns. The key issue is to remember that what is involved is child abuse - it is merely a new and developing medium that is used to assist the abuser.

Children and Young People who Abuse

12.21 As has been suggested, young people may be extremely skilled in the use of computer technology. Some young people may also develop abusive behaviour and use the internet to make contact with potential victims.

12.22 Where a young person is found to be involved in abusive behaviour, the procedures set out in Chapter 9 should be followed, with reference made to the Guidance on Children Using Sexually Abusive Behaviour.

Children who are Subjects of Abusive Images

12.23 Children can be severely traumatised by knowing that images of them being abused exists on the internet and is probably subject to wide circulation. Where such trauma is known about, consideration should be given to providing therapeutic services.