

## Caught in the Net! Technology assisted harmful sexual behaviours

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Between 2011/12 and 2015/16, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) experienced a **34% increase in the number** of sexual offences reported to them by a child against a child. Scottish Analytical Service's (2017) review of 'Other sexual crimes' highlighted a significant increase in offences which were cyber-enabled (where the internet has been used as a means to facilitate the offence) from 38% in 2013/14 to 51% in 2016/17. Approximately 1/4 (24%) of cyber enabled crimes of 'Communicating indecently' and 'Cause to view sexual activity or images' were committed by an individual under 16 years against a victim who was also under 16. A further 28% of these crimes committed were by an individual aged between 16 and 19 against a victim who was under 16. This compares to 8% and 5% respectively, of non-cyber enabled crimes of 'Communicating indecently' and 'Cause to view sexual activity or images'. This suggests that a considerable proportion of online sexual offences are committed by individuals aged 19 or under. This is congruent with more general trends about sexual crime which suggest around 1/3 of sexual abuse is perpetrated by children and adolescents.

### Legislation

Under 18s may not fully understand that some of their sexual behaviours may be illegal, nor the range of consequences, irrespective of the intent underlying these behaviours. [Martellozzo et al \(2016\)](#) noted that many young people do not recognise that sending self-produced sexual images (SPSI) is illegal. In addition, it is important to consider how [brain development](#) may influence their involvement in what adults may perceive as risk taking behaviours. For example, SPSI or seeking out [pornography](#), can escalate for some to viewing more extreme images that may include indecent images of children, which may reflect a curiosity and looking for peer pornography, without understanding the implications. The Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009 highlights the importance of understanding that [consent means 'free agreement'](#) and provides examples of where this may not be the case, as well as other behaviours deemed illegal such as [voyeurism](#), [communicating indecently](#) and [coercing someone to look at a sexual image](#). The [Civic Government \(Scotland\) Act 1982 s.52](#) makes it an offence to take, distribute or have in your possession an indecent image of a child under the age of 18 years. A [CEOP report \(2013a\)](#) highlighted that of 70,000 still and moving images in the report, 1/5 of these were SPSI generated by the child/young person displayed in the image. Rapid technological advancements mean we exist in a time of "digital childhood" and children are living and growing up in an increasingly digital world (Megele, 2018). We must understand that [digital technologies](#) are an integral part of how children and young people 'do' their romantic relationships from flirting, through to ending relationships. As adults, we have a responsibility to understand the interface between the online and offline world of children and teach them how to navigate this with the ability to recognise and manage risk across both.

The [NSPCC \(2017\)](#) definition of Technology Assisted –Harmful Sexual Behaviour (TA-HSB) is "one or more children engaging in sexual discussions or acts – using the internet and/or any image-creating/sharing or communication device – which is considered inappropriate and/or harmful given their age or stage of development. This behaviour falls on a continuum of severity from the use of pornography to online child sexual abuse."

In order to support the small minority of children who present with TA-HSB, these behaviours must be viewed on a continuum, which spans across normal, healthy, problematic and abusive behaviours just as any presentation of HSB should. The [Brook Traffic Light Tool](#) and [Hackett's Continuum](#) both provide a developmental context for considering the behaviours within the context of that child, their experiences, understanding and capacity. Behaviours are not necessarily linear and can transition between and across these aspects, dependent on many contextual factors for the child in question. We must understand that child sexual behaviours may have different motivations and developmental significance across developmental stages. The perceptions and understanding of child sexual behaviour is also influenced by gender, changes in culture and historical aspects.

The key findings of the [NSPCC \(2017\)](#) study of 275 under 18s using their Turn the Page project for children presenting with Technology Assisted –Harmful Sexual Behaviour (TA-HSB) (limitations were noted regarding under 12s and females) highlighted a number of key findings. They found a strong correlation between the developmentally inappropriate use of pornography and offline HSB compared with other forms of TA-HSB. They found notable similarities in the characteristics and backgrounds of children who presented with both offline and online HSB (dual HSB) and those individuals with offline HSB only. Interventions for those displaying TA-HSB only, may need to differ to those who also display offline HSB. They also found that a more punitive response was taken to those displaying TA-HSB than those whose harmful sexual behaviour included offline behaviours (either exclusively or in addition to TA-HSB).

The study highlighted differences in characteristics between those involved in TA-HSB only, those involved in dual behaviours and those involved in offline only HSB. The children who presented with only TA-HSB appeared to come from more stable backgrounds with less incidents of parental separation, less adversity or trauma during their childhood, more positive parental relationships, no contact with statutory services prior to the presenting HSB and were approximately three years older at the onset of their HSB. This group demonstrated better emotional regulation, less impulsivity and less anger, aggression and general offending behaviours than those involved in either dual or offline only. However, this group experienced higher levels of online abuse and victimisation than children with either offline or dual HSB that may correspond with their own presentations of HSB. The study hypothesised that engaging in TA-HSB (only) may relate to the onset of puberty, pornography use and/or the young male's own online sexual victimisation and grooming.

## A holistic response

We must not forget that under 18s who present with HSB are children, and that not all sexual behaviour by children is harmful. Whilst there is emerging evidence highlighting differences in the characteristics of children who present with TA-HSB, the response should always be multi-modal and informed by understanding the child within the context of their wider experiences, developmental capacity, relationships and environments. To [reduce risks](#) and promote developmental opportunity to move away from HSB is crucial, focussing on [resilience-based models](#) as opposed to deficit based. Early identification of exposure to pornography prior to age 13 years may be an indicator of future risk of HSB. Professionals and adults must be vigilant and able to respond appropriately to model appropriate relationships, and challenge any gender bias or negative views towards females. Understanding the differences in characteristics of under 18s involved in TA- HSB solely are critical to [formulating](#) an understanding of their pathway into HSB and the interventions which will encourage and support their shift towards more prosocial behaviours, to achieve their aspirations and goals.

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