

NSPCC Policy Summary Child Abuse Images

Objective

To stop children being sexually abused through the production of child abuse images, and to prevent the sale and distribution of child abuse images.

Key points

Terminology

The term 'child pornography' remains a legal term in many jurisdictions and is commonly used in the media. However, the NSPCC favours the term 'child abuse images' as the NSPCC considers that to refer to images of child abuse as 'pornography' detracts from the seriousness of the crime by implying that there is consent from the children involved and that it is neither abusive nor harmful.

What are child abuse images?

Child abuse images are a visual record of the sexual abuse of a child. These types of images range from pictures of children who have been posed to imply sexual interest, images of children engaged in sexual contact with other children and children engaged in sexual contact with adults, to more extreme forms of abuse which may include bestiality.

'Morphed' or 'pseudo-images' can also be produced. This involves digitally manipulating photographs to make it appear that a child is in an indecent situation, for example by superimposing a child's head on to an adult's body. Cartoons portraying children engaged in sexual acts are also sometimes used. Debates exist as to whether pseudo images and cartoons constitute child abuse images as there is no proof that the children featured have been the victims of actual sexual abuse. Previously, the Protection of Children Act 1978 only considered it an offence to produce pseudo-images, meaning perpetrators could possess these images without legal sanction. However, in December 2006, the Government announced its intention to outlaw computer-generated images of child abuse and this is currently being worked on.

Although, some people gain sexual gratification from looking at images of children in normal settings, such as semi-naked children playing on beaches, these do not constitute child abuse images as they do not record or depict the sexual abuse of a child. Child abuse images can also include videos of child abuse, known as 'live' or 'real world' abuse, which can be disseminated over the internet.

The impact of child abuse images on children

There is limited research into the short- and long-term effects on children portrayed in child abuse images. Research published so far highlights the following:

- Once an image has been uploaded to the internet it may be replicated and downloaded an unlimited number of times. The knowledge that images of abuse cannot ever be fully deleted has a profound effect on the victims involved and this may follow them into their adult lives. Victims may also become aware that the material involved can be used to groom and to abuse other children.
- Many people do not report the fact that they have been the victim of sexual abuse. Where there is a record that abuse has taken place in the form of child abuse images or videos of live abuse, this can have the effect of preventing more people from speaking out about their experiences. This will be exacerbated by feelings of shame and a fear that they may have been somehow complicit or to blame for their victimisation.
- Child abuse images are also used to groom potential victims. Perpetrators of sexual abuse have been known to use sex abuse images as part of the grooming process, in order to desensitise children and young people to the idea of sexual contact. Abusers have also been known to give children access to age-inappropriate pictures or adult pornography to achieve the same results.
- In light of the above, there is a need for long-term support and treatment for the children involved. We also need more research into how investigations of child abuse images are handled (especially the impact upon children when pictures are used to identify them), and the follow-up therapeutic support needed for children abused in such images.

Dissemination of child abuse images through the internet

In the past, producers of child abuse images were limited in the extent to which they could obtain and disseminate images. Typically, activity would involve a small number of sex offenders sharing images face-to-face or through the post. However, the advent of the internet, scanners and digital cameras has meant that it is now easier to make, disseminate and access child abuse images. There has been a shift from small-scale, 'amateur', non-profit production of images, to the distribution of images by members of organised crime, especially in the United States and Russia, in order to benefit financially.

Child abuse images are becoming more prevalent online. Figures from an NCH study show that in 1995 the Greater Manchester Police seized 12 images of child abuse images on paper and video (Carr, 2004). In 2004 the same Manchester police force arrested one man who alone was found to be in possession of almost 1,000,000 images (Carr, 2004). In 1996 the Internet Watch Foundation processed 615 complaints of online abuse images (85% relate to suspected child abuse websites), compared with 34,871 in 2007 (Internet Watch foundation annual report, 2006).

Responses to child abuse images online

The Internet Watch Foundation encourages members of the public to report illegal material through their website at www.iwf.org.uk. The Internet Watch Foundation has the authority to close down illegal websites that are hosted in the United Kingdom (UK). Since its inception in 1996, the organisation has processed an average of 1,000 reports a month, with more than 31,000 websites found to contain potentially illegal child abuse content. Due to the partnership approach involving industry and children's charities and continued pressure from children's charities, the IWF was able to ask UK-based internet service providers (ISPs) not carry newsgroups with child abuse images. As a result, the amount of online abuse images that originate from the UK has been reduced from 18 per cent to 0.2 per cent (Internet Watch Foundation annual report, 2006).

Despite the success in removing illegal sites that are hosting images in the UK, the problem of sites containing images that are hosted overseas persists. Where sites are hosted in other countries such as the US and Russia, these can be added to a list of sites which can then be blocked by ISPs in the UK using 'cleanfeed' technology. The NSPCC, working with other children's charities, has enjoyed considerable success in persuading ISPs to access to block child abuse images hosted from servers overseas. The NSPCC also campaigned successfully on this issue in May of 2006 and secured a commitment from the Government to increase the number of Internet Service Providers blocking access by the end of 2007. Although the vast majority of the domestic ISPs do now block access to such images the NSPCC will continue to lobby and campaign on this issue to ensure that take up is 100%.

Law enforcement agencies in several countries have also conducted 'sting' operations to trace and prosecute individuals who pay to access images of child sexual abuse. Operation Ore, conducted by the US Postal Service, monitored a website hosted in Texas to track the details of individuals paying by credit card to view child abuse images online. 7,000 people from the UK were identified as suspects and over 1,500 have been arrested (Palmer, 2004). These operations have helped to shed some light on those who consume, produce and distribute child abuse images. However, they do not provide an adequate understanding of some of the wider contexts in which the production of child abuse images can take place and its relationship with other forms of child sexual abuse.

Children's Charities Coalition for Internet Safety (CHIS)

In 2000, some of the major UK children's charities, including the NSPCC, joined to form the Children's Charities Coalition for Internet Safety (CHIS). CHIS is now represented on the Government's Internet Task Force. The National Hi-Tech Crime Unit was established in 2001 in order to target serious crimes perpetrated through technology. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre was founded in 2006 and aims to maximise international links to prevent child abuse. The NSPCC was heavily involved in both lobbying for and in ensuring the creation of CEOP, and is partnered with it at an operational level. The NSPCC continues to campaign on internet safety issues for children and young people.

New technologies/grooming methods

As seen above, the internet has fast become the principal medium for the distribution and consumption of child abuse images. The measures outlined above mean it is now more difficult for individuals to access child abuse images through pay per view websites. However, new technologies are being misused to allow the dissemination and sharing of child abuse images.

Most mobile phones can now be used to capture and share child abuse images as most include a digital camera (Palmer, 2004). MP4 players can be used to view and share video clips. Both of these personal devices are popular with young people. Unlike the internet, there is no way to monitor the use of these devices.

In addition, peer-to-peer websites allow file sharing between computers (Save the Children, 2005). This is a way for adults with a sexual interest in children to add to and share their collection of images. Adults may also transfer inappropriate adult pornography or child abuse images on to young people's computers as part of the grooming process, in order to desensitise children to sexual images and behaviour (Palmer, 2004).

Prevalence of child abuse images

It is not possible to gain accurate figures for the number of children who are involved in child abuse images in the UK. UK data tends to be restricted to small case studies, survivor stories, Home Office statistics and Police operational data. Prevalence studies of child sexual abuse rarely include questions on children being exposed to or used in images of abuse.

Worldwide, the volume of child abuse images being distributed online appears to be increasing. In 2005 Interpol estimated believed they may now have in their database images of up to 10,000 different children, which is an eightfold increase within six years. This figure does not include images found by national law enforcement agencies that have not been passed on to Interpol. Currently Interpol's Child Abuse Image database has more than 200,000 images showing the sexual abuse of over 20,000 individual children. In typical arrests today, the number of images seized often number in the thousands or tens of thousands, reflecting the large number of images now available. For example, in 2004 Manchester police arrested one man who was found to be in possession to *one million* images, including many duplicates. There is also some evidence that many of the images being produced involve younger and younger children being sexually abused in ever more violent ways (Carr, 2006).

Given the number of these images circulating on the internet, the NSPCC is concerned that only relatively small numbers of children have been successfully identified from these images and therefore protected. In May 2006, for example, the Interpol database contained photographic evidence of more than 20,000 individual children, but fewer than 500 of these had been identified. Many of the images in circulation are very old and given the number of images that are often in one collection it can be enormously

resource intensive to do the police work. The NSPCC has been involved in Victim Identification work from an early stage and continues to support this.

The impact of child abuse images in circulation

It is logical to consider that consumption of child abuse images creates a demand which is satisfied through the abuse of children (Carr, 2004). Where demand increases, so does the need to sexually abuse children. Others argue that the level of abuse has remained constant but there is now more cataloguing of abuse as images can be made, processed and posted without scrutiny because digital cameras and personal computers are more commonly used. Home Office statistics show that there has been a 1,500 per cent increase in prosecutions for the offences of making and taking child abuse images from 35 prosecutions to 549 prosecutions. (Carr, 2004).

Links between use of child abuse images and ‘real world’ abuse

It is also important to recognise that the links between *consumption* of child abuse images and contact sexual abuse crimes against children is an under-researched area. There is some research to suggest that many of the individuals arrested for child sexual abuse crimes have been in possession of child abuse images (Healey, 1996). An investigation by the US Postal service in 2000 found that around 35% of people who look at child abuse images are also abusers in the real world (Carr, 2004).

However, there are very different views and research finding on the links between viewing images and contact abuse. Professor Finklehor of the University of New Hampshire suggests the rate is 17% (i.e. 17% of all men arrested for internet-related offences will also turn out to be involved in perpetrating sexual abuse). It is thought that a very high proportion of those arrested under operation Ore had no previous contact with law enforcement agencies or social services.

Legislation and sentencing

Article 34 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states:
“States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. For these purposes, States Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent: (a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity; (b) The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices; (c) The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials”.

The Protection of Children Act 1978 states:

“It is an offence for a person-

- (a) to take, or permit to be taken or to make, any indecent¹ photograph or pseudo-photograph of a child; or

¹ The term ‘indecent’ is not legally defined

- (b) to distribute or show such indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs; or
- (c) to have in his possession such indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs, with a view to their being distributed or shown by himself to others; or
- (d) to publish or cause to be published any advertisement likely to be understood as conveying that the advertiser distributes or shows such indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs or intends to do so.”

The Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 increased the maximum penalties for the taking, making and distributing of indecent photographs under Section 6 of the Protection of Children Act 1978 from three years’ imprisonment or an unlimited fine, or both, to 10 years’ imprisonment or an unlimited fine or both. The Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 also increased the maximum penalty for possessing an indecent photograph of a child.

The NSPCC welcomed the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which extended the Protection of Children Act 1978 to cover indecent photographs of children aged 16 and 17. The Act also introduced a new set of offences specifically dealing with the exploitation of children through child abuse images, providing protection for all children up to age 18. These include causing or inciting child abuse images, controlling a child involved in child abuse images, and arranging or facilitating child abuse images. It also introduced a new offence of meeting a child following sexual grooming (Ost, 2004).

Child abuse images are a global problem. There is the need for a consistent international response to prevent the production and dissemination of child abuse images and to raise awareness about the extent of the problem. Despite increased collaboration, penalties and distribution laws vary in Europe and beyond. This can create loopholes which can be exploited by producers and collectors of child abuse images. National and cross-national efforts to prevent child abuse images can be hindered for example by different interpretations of what constitutes a child abuse image.

Recommendations

- More research is needed into the effects on children and young people who have been affected by sexual abuse and child abuse images. This will help practitioners to design more effective therapeutic services for this group.
- There is a need for more research into the relationship between viewing child abuse images and other forms of child sex abuse. We need to know that we can accurately risk assess offenders and understand patterns of offending in order to inform sentencing and management of offenders.

- More training should be provided for child protection workers to help them to deal with abusive image cases and the impact of this form of abuse on children and young people.
- Data collection of internet offences needs to be established to identify and monitor new and developing trends. With the internet becoming the main medium for distribution and consumption of abusive images of children, Home Office statistics need to differentiate between possession and distribution of abusive images of children offences committed with or without the Internet.
- The government should ensure that all Internet Service Providers are blocking access to Child Abuse Images. The Government is now committed to encouraging greater take up of 'cleanfeed' solutions and the NSPCC will be continuing to campaign and lobby on this issue until we have 100% take up from the IWF list.
- Greater international cooperation and activity is needed in order to tackle the increasing number of child abuse images on the internet as many countries are reaching the limits of what they can do in their own countries. It is important to build a successful NGO network to lead and campaign on these issues closely involving governments, law enforcement and industry. It is important to ensure that this issue remains on the agenda at EU and UN levels.
- There is an increased need for viable technical solutions and for improved technical solutions that might assist law enforcement to identify victims depicted in child sexual abuse images. Also, given the new means available for sharing images such as the through Peer 2 Peer or file-sharing programmes, it is increasingly important to have technical solutions to help to track illegal traffic shared in this way.

Supporting documents/ research

Carr, J (2004) *'Child Abuse, child pornography and the internet'* London: NCH

Carr, J (2006) *'Out of sight, out of mind. Tackling child sex abuse images on the internet: a global challenge'* London: NCH

Gillespie, A (2006) *'The problem of tracings'* Leicester: De Montfort University

Healy, M.A. (1996) *Child Pornography: an international perspective*, World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Stockholm.

Home Office Communications Directorate (2004), *Protecting the public from sexual crime – An explanation of the Sexual Offences Act 2003* London: Home Office

Internet Watch Foundation (2006) *'2006 Half yearly report'* London: IWF

Mitchell, K, Finkelhor, D and Wolak, J (2001) 'Risk factors for and impact on online sexual solicitation of youth' *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 285, No. 23, June 20

Ost, S (2004) 'Getting to Grips with sexual grooming? The new offence under the sexual offences act 2003' *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, No. 26(2), pp. 147-159

Palmer, T and Stacey, L (2004) '*Just one click: sexual abuse of children and young people through the internet and mobile phone technology*' Essex: Barnardos

Renold, E., Creighton, S, Atkinson, C. and Carr, J (2003) *Images of Abuse – a review of the evidence on child pornography*, London: NSPCC

Rosen, L (2006) *Adolescents in MySpace: Identity formation, friendship and sexual predators* California: California State University

Save the Children (2005) '*Save the Children Denmark working to prevent the IT-related sexual exploitation of children: annual report*' Copenhagen: Save the Children Denmark

Save the Children (2006) '*Visible Evidence – Forgotten Children. The need for a child protection and children's rights focus in identifying children who have been sexually abused for the production of child abuse images*'. Save the Children Europe Group

Stop it now! (2005) '*The internet and children – what's the problem?*' London: Stop it now! Organisation

Stutzman, F (2006) '*An evaluation of identity-sharing behaviour in social network communities*' Proceedings of the 2006 iDMAa and IMS Code Conference

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1998. *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: OHCHR.

Williams, K (2004) '*Child pornography law: does it protect children?* *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, No. 26(3), pp. 245-261

NSPCC Inform reading list on child abuse images:

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/OnlineResources/ReadingLists/ChildAbuseAndTheInternet/ChildAbuseAndTheInternet_asp_ifega26157.html

Date last reviewed: April 2008

Contact: Zoë Hilton, Policy Advisor (Child Protection)
Tel: 020 7825 1329; email: zhilton@nspcc.org.uk