



# SAFEGUARDING UPDATE - WHAT DO PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

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TUESDAY 29TH SEPTEMBER 2026 • ISSUE 5

## **What parents need to know: Online harm groups**

Children and young people spend time in many different online spaces – messaging apps, gaming platforms, social media, channels and online communities. Most of these experiences will be positive, but there are also people and groups who deliberately use online spaces to manipulate, pressure and exploit others.

New guidance from CEOP Education, part of the National Crime Agency, is helping parents and carers understand a concerning form of online abuse involving online harm groups. These groups use tactics including grooming, manipulation, coercion, threats and blackmail to pressure young people into harmful activities. Importantly, these situations rarely begin with an obvious threat.

### **What are online harm groups?**

Online harm groups are groups of people who use online platforms to manipulate, control, threaten or exploit others.

They may operate through places children already use, including messaging apps, gaming platforms, channels and servers.

Some individuals within these groups seek recognition or status by demonstrating how they have manipulated or harmed another person.

Young people can be pressured into:

- **harming themselves or somebody else**
- **sharing nude or sexual images or videos**
- **carrying out humiliating acts**
- **hurting siblings or pets**
- **recording or livestreaming harmful acts**

Both those being targeted and those involved in causing harm are often under the age of 18.

### **How might it start?**

It may begin with what appears to be an ordinary online conversation. Someone might show an interest in the same game, music, hobby or experience as your child. They may offer friendship, compliments, attention or emotional support.

For a young person who is feeling lonely, isolated or simply looking for friendship and belonging, this attention can feel genuine. Over time, however, the relationship may change.

Your child might be:

- **asked increasingly personal questions**
- **encouraged to keep conversations secret**
- **asked to send photographs or videos**
- **dared or challenged to prove themselves**
- **pressured to do something uncomfortable**
- **made to feel guilty for saying no**
- **threatened or blackmailed**
- **told that something bad will happen if they leave**

Personal information, photographs or recordings may then be used to control or blackmail them.

### **Could this happen to my child?**

**Yes.**

CEOP stresses that any young person can be targeted, regardless of their age or how experienced they appear to be online.

There may, however, be circumstances that make engagement with an online community particularly appealing. A child may be looking for friendship, belonging, attention, approval or a community where they feel understood.

This is why conversations about online safety need to go beyond simply telling children not to talk to strangers.

Someone online may not feel like a stranger once a relationship has developed.

### **What signs should I look out for?**

There may be no obvious sign that a child is being harmed, and one change in behaviour does not automatically mean that something is wrong.

It is more helpful to notice patterns or significant changes.

You might notice your child:

- **spending significantly more time online, particularly alone**
- **becoming intensely focused on a new online friendship or group**
- **becoming increasingly secretive about their online activity**
- **appearing distressed, angry or withdrawn after being online**
- **receiving unexplained money, gifts or in-game currency**
- **having unexplained injuries or trying to conceal injuries**
- **appearing frightened about leaving an online group**
- **being pressured to record or livestream themselves**
- **having unexplained concerns involving siblings, other children or animals**

Remember that many of these behaviours can have other explanations. What matters is noticing changes, staying curious and keeping communication open.

### **Why doesn't my child just leave the group?**

For an adult looking from the outside, it can be difficult to understand why a young person continues communicating with someone who is harming them. Grooming and coercion can be extremely powerful.

A young person may have initially received friendship, attention and emotional support. They may become emotionally attached to the person or group.

Later, they may be frightened that private information, images or videos will be shared. They may have been threatened or blackmailed, or believe that complying is their only option.

They may even defend the person harming them or minimise what has happened. This does not mean they have chosen the abuse.

### **How can I help protect my child?**

You do not need to understand every app, game or new piece of technology. One of the most important protective factors is ensuring your child knows that they can come to you when something goes wrong.

Talk regularly about who they communicate with online and how those relationships make them feel. Try asking:

- **"Who do you enjoy talking to online?"**
- **"Have you made any new online friends recently?"**
- **"Has anyone ever asked you to keep something online secret?"**
- **"What would you do if somebody dared you to do something you didn't want to do?"**
- **"Has anyone ever made you feel guilty for saying no?"**
- **"What would you do if someone threatened to share something about you?"**
- **"Who could you talk to if something online started to worry you?"**

Talking little and often makes it easier for children to ask for help when they need it.

### **What should I do if my child tells me something has happened?**

How you respond in the first few moments can be really important.

Try to:

- **stay calm and listen**
- **avoid blame or judgement**
- **reassure your child that they are not in trouble**
- **make clear that you will help them**
- **encourage them to stop communicating with the person or group**
- **do not delete messages, images, videos, usernames or other potential evidence**
- **seek help and report concerns**

If your child has already sent an image, responded to messages or done something they regret, try not to focus initially on what they "should" have done. They need to know that asking for help will not make things worse.

### **Where can I get help?**

If you believe your child has been targeted or harmed by an online harm group, contact the police on 101. If your child or another person is in immediate danger, call 999.

Children and young people under 18 can also report concerns about online sexual abuse directly to the CEOP Safety Centre.

You can also speak to your child's school if you are worried about something happening online. The school's Designated Safeguarding Lead can help you consider what further safeguarding support may be required.

### **The key message for parents**

Online harm does not always begin with something frightening or obviously dangerous. It can begin with friendship, attention, shared interests and a feeling of belonging.

Help your child recognise that healthy friendships, online and offline, respect boundaries. A genuine friend should not pressure them, humiliate them, threaten them, ask them to prove themselves or make them frightened to say "no" or leave.

Most importantly, make sure your child knows: **Whatever has happened online, you can tell me. You won't be in trouble, and we will work out what to do together.**

### **Free resources for parents and carers**

#### **CEOP Education - Online harm groups**

**Free guidance** from the National Crime Agency explaining online harm groups, how children may be groomed, coerced or blackmailed, warning signs to look out for and what parents should do if they are concerned.

#### **Find out more:**

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/articles/online-harm-groups/>

#### **NSPCC - Grooming: Advice for Parents and Carers**

**Free practical guidance** explaining how grooming happens online, how offenders can build trust before introducing pressure or control, warning signs parents might notice and how to respond and seek help.

#### **Find out more:**

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/types-of-abuse/grooming/>

#### **CEOP Education - #AskTheAwkward**

**Free videos and help sheets** to help parents of secondary-aged children start conversations about online friendships and relationships, including building trust, recognising unhealthy behaviour and knowing what to do when something goes wrong.

#### **Find out more:**

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/ask-the-awkward/>

#### **CEOP Education - Parent and carer online safety help sheets**

**Free, easy-to-use help sheets** for parents of primary and secondary-aged children, containing practical online safety advice, resources to use with children and links to further help and support.

#### **Find out more:**

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/professionals/resources/parent-and-carer-help-sheets/>

#### **Childline - Online grooming**

**A useful resource to explore with children and young people**, explaining how grooming can begin through friendship and trust before developing into pressure, threats, blackmail or requests to do something sexual or illegal. It also explains how children can seek help and report concerns.

#### **Find out more:**

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/online-grooming/>