

## Images are children

### Objectives

This module will help you explore and understand:

- the false reasoning some people use to justify offending behaviour and avoid taking responsibility for their actions
- that these images are of real children being abused
- the impacts on the children in the image

### Images are children

It's likely that you will have used justifications to persuade yourself that it is ok to allow yourself to view sexual images of children.

Justification describes how, when we encounter a situation in which our behaviour is inconsistent with our own or others' beliefs and values, our minds tend to come up with false reasons for why our behaviour is okay. These reasons are called 'justifications', and they serve to make us feel more comfortable and give us permission to keep engaging in the behaviour.

At first you might be aware that you are using justifications to let yourself look at illegal images. But your awareness of these justifications might fade over time the more they are used. Becoming aware of when we are making these justifications is the first step to being able to challenge them.

### Starting point

Using the table below, write down your current level of knowledge and understanding about your awareness of the child abuse taking place in these images (1 = very little understanding; 2 = some understanding; 3 = secure understanding).

I understand how illegal images victimise children.	1	2	3
I understand justifications I have used to allow myself to continue offending online.	1	2	3
I understand the effects of being photographed on the child in the image.	1	2	3

Regardless of where you have scored yourself, it is important to work through the material in this module. We find that if people accept the reality of the harm caused to children, then they are less likely to continue with their illegal online behaviour.

## The effects on the child of being involved in the production of sexual images

Psychologists have tried to look at what it means to the child to be photographed and for these photographs to be used in a sexual way (e.g. fantasy and/or masturbation etc.).

### During the abuse

While it is convenient to think about photography as being separate from the actual abuse, for the majority of children this is not the case. Very often being photographed is PART OF the abuse; victims see the lasting photographic evidence as a continuation of the abuse they experienced.

Knowing that images of them are circulating on the web, and that strangers use these photographs for inappropriate sexual purposes, causes ongoing victimisation for the children involved.

Before continuing, you might find it helpful to view this short video clip of an individual explaining his realisation of the harm to children, as a result of his own online behaviour.

*VIDEO on website*

Abuse can produce physical symptoms, such as urinary infections and soreness around the genitalia or anus, headaches and vomiting. Depression, tiredness, difficulties in concentrating and nightmares are also common in such children. It can also lead to other problems, such as the child behaving or talking in a sexual way, acting out or behaving aggressively, as well as impacting on their relationships with other children and adult relationships when they are older.

### After the abuse

The long-term consequences of having been photographed can include:

- Intense bad feelings, such as a negative picture of themselves, long-term feelings of shame, hopelessness, an inability to feel anything or relate to anyone.
- A distressing awareness that even though the abuse has stopped, others may still be able to access their photographs and that there is nothing that they can do about it.
- Worry that the photographs may encourage the abuse of other children.

### Consent

‘Consent’ means to give permission for something to happen. It is important for us to consider the issue of consent when we are talking about the children in the images because children are not able to consent to sexual activity. Additionally, children cannot consent to images of abuse being taken or shared online.

The following video gives one man’s experience of coming to terms with the harm that this behaviour can cause to the children in the images.

*VIDEO on website*

### Why children are not able to consent to sexual activity

Children are not able to give consent because they can not fully understand what they are consenting to, or the emotional impact and consequences of sex.

Adults are generally able to give informed consent about sexual activity and photographs of them, unless they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs or have some kind of vulnerability. In Australia the age of consent for sexual activity is 16 or 17 years old (depending on individual state/territory laws). But any sexual picture of a child under 18 years old is illegal.

Children are not able to give consent to engage in sexual activity, and consent is further taken away from children when sexual images of them are taken and posted on the internet. Once an image is posted online, all control is lost over that image. The victim will experience further harm by images of their abuse being out there, shared and viewed, all beyond their control.

## Sexual images of a child are illegal

The idea of justifications can also be extended to the type, or category, of sexual image you are looking at online. It is important to remember that any sexual image of a child is illegal.

**IMPORTANT:** The age that defines a child varies between each Australian State/Territory. It can range from 16 years old to 18 years old. If you are unsure about the age of someone in an image then you should not view it. Not knowing the age is not an excuse.

These are all illegal when used for sexual purposes:

- naturist/nude images
- 'modelling' images
- images of children with no adult present in the image
- cartoon/manga/computer-generated images
- victim-taken sexual images

Any sexual image of a child is illegal.

Abuse includes victimisation when the photograph was taken. Abuse also includes the continuing victimisation the child will experience knowing that images of them are online, which they have no control over.

The reality of viewing naturist, nude, modelling or cartoon images is that this behaviour may act as a 'slippery slope'. These sorts of images might act to reinforce sexual interest in children and lead the person viewing the images to become curious about what other sorts of material might be available. When children are depicted in images either on their own or with other children, where no adult is present in the image, it is important that you remind yourself that an adult will have been behind that camera. An adult will have coerced the child(ren) into posing for the camera and an adult will have taken and shared that photograph to be used for a sexual purpose. This is exploitation because a child cannot consent.

Regarding victim-taken sexual images of children, it is important to remember that even though the child may have agreed to taking the photograph in the first place, they almost certainly will not have consented to the world-wide sharing of that image. Children do not have the foresight to understand the consequences that sending an image of themselves may bring. They do not understand that once an image is sent that it cannot be retrieved. Once the reality of this becomes known it can be very distressing and have a significant emotional impact on them.

## Child sexual exploitation

It is not uncommon for children to be sexually exploited as a part of the process of producing illegal images – for example, by receiving gifts, drugs, affection or accommodation – in exchange for engaging in sexual activity.

Sometimes pictures are taken of children without them knowing – for example, at the beach – and sometimes pictures are taken with the child's knowledge. Sometimes a child will be coerced into taking and posting an image of themselves, without fully realising the consequences of doing this.

As part of this module in helping you recognise and acknowledge that the children in the images are real children, it is helpful – although difficult – to get yourself to think about how that child got to be in that situation of being in front of that camera.

## **Exercise 1: Understanding and challenging justifications**

For people to allow themselves to view sexual images of children, they will generally be using a number of justifications to persuade themselves that it is ok to do what they are doing.

This film includes some of the justifications that people use to allow themselves to continue offending online.

### *VIDEO on website*

If you haven't looked at the justifications module, take some time to complete this now before moving on so that you can recognise your justifications at the time you were engaging in harmful behaviour and how you can challenge them.

If you have viewed or are worried about viewing sexual images of children, consider some of the examples below that you could add to your justification table.

There are examples provided.

<b>Justifications</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
<i>"I am only looking at pictures."</i>	<i>The children in the images are real children who are being sexually abused.</i>
<i>"The images were already online."</i>	<i>By looking at child sexual abuse images I am aiding to the demand of this material being made, which means I am allowing the sexual abuse of children to continue. Victim-survivors identify the re-victimisation they experience when individuals access these images.</i>
<i>"The child took this photograph of themselves."</i>	

Remember, you should repeat all the phrases you write in the challenge column in your head, so that this sort of thinking becomes automatic if you start to use the justifications.

It can be difficult to explore this exercise independently and so we encourage you to contact the [helpline](#) advisors who are here to support you and help you further explore your learnings. You can stay anonymous and don't have to give your real name or any contact details. If you're not ready to speak to anyone yet, you can also use the Stop It Now! Australia live chat.

*Please return to the website and complete the **Reflection** questions at the end of this module.*