

Sexual communication with children online

Objectives

This module will help you explore and understand:

- Your motivation for engaging sexually with children online
- How your behaviour progressed into sexual communication
- How you might have justified your behaviour

What do we mean by ‘sexual communication’?

In Australia, an adult is committing a criminal offence if they intentionally communicate with a child for the purposes of sexual gratification.

Sexual communication with a child is often referred to as online grooming. It can take many forms and with different motivations. All forms are regarded as child sexual abuse. They are illegal and cause harm.

Some people communicate sexually with a child or children online because they find it sexually arousing. Other people do so in order to persuade children to send them sexual images or videos of themselves. Some people communicate sexually with children online because they want to meet the child offline in order to sexually interact with them. And some people say they communicate with children online to get a sense of connection. These motivations can overlap and change over time, so that it's not always clear at the outset what someone really wants from their sexual communication, but we do know all of these behaviours are illegal and harmful.

People's behaviour varies too. For example, many people engaging in this behaviour report having sexual contact with lots of children online, and sending sexual pictures of themselves to the children, too. Other people may communicate sexually with only one child.

Some introduce the topic of sex very quickly, whereas others will engage in 'grooming behaviours', where they spend time building rapport and establishing trust with a child before the issue of sex is raised.

Different stages of sexual communication with children

In order to understand more about how to avoid situations which may lead to you communicating sexually with a child in the future, it can be helpful to understand that the behaviour happens in stages.

Some people start communicating with children about general topics. This communication may continue for a while and may escalate to include sexual content. Some individuals may attempt to meet with the child. During conversations some individuals may go to great lengths to hide this behaviour from others and avoid detection. It is important to recognise that each of these stages are part of the offending behaviour.

Remember that not every stage will be relevant for everyone. For example, some people do not try to make friends with the child concerned, or to form a relationship with them. But other people do. The difference often says a lot about people's motivations.

To change behaviour, it is important to recognise and understand the patterns in past behaviour. This can help us know the signs of the behaviour repeating itself and help us think about how we can prevent it from happening again.

Consider reflecting on the following:

- What stage did you start with?
- How did you move through the stages?
- What patterns can you recognise in your offending behaviour?
- What can you put in place to ensure that this does not happen again?

The cycle of online grooming

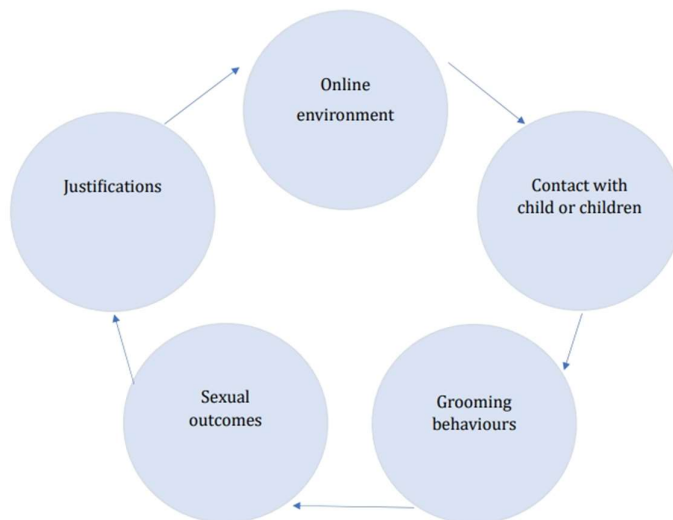
People often say offending “just happens”, but we know this isn’t true. To sexually communicate with a child is a process where several decisions are made.

Some people find it helpful to think of their behaviour as following a repeated pattern. Considering your behaviour patterns can help you to understand the form your behaviour took, and the factors involved in your decision making. This will put you in a position where you can recognise this and change your behaviour so it is not repeated in the future.

Exercise 1: Cycle of online grooming

Look at the cycle below and think about how each stage might have applied to your online sexual behaviour towards a particular child or children, in general. How a person moves through the cycle will be unique to them, and is likely to have changed over time as their behaviour developed. However, this gives a good overview of how your offending cycle may work and how you can break this cycle at different stages.

A full description of each of the stages of the cycle and examples of intervention strategies for each stage are outlined below.



As you read through the stages, make note of the strategies and barriers you can use at each stage to ensure you do not continue through the cycle. It is important to recognise that there are a variety of helpful strategies and barriers referenced throughout the self-help modules. You may also find it helpful to reach out to the [Stop It Now! Australia helpline](#) to explore potential barriers further.

The online environment

As well as ideas like the Triple A model (which you can find more about in the Online World module), people can also perceive the internet as a place where they can express themselves sexually more openly. For example, some people might feel more confident talking to others about sex online compared to offline. Or they might feel that they can portray themselves with more confidence or as being more attractive etc. Refer to the [Online World module](#) for more learning about the online environment.

To avoid offending, think about:

- How do you behave online?
- Are there other online behaviours that concern you?
- Are you a different person online than you are offline?
- How much time are you spending online?

Now recognising the online world can be a risky environment for people, what barriers can you put in place to keep yourself safe online?

e.g., Creating some more opportunities to socialise offline; setting alarms to limit online time, accessing the internet only in communal areas' downloading website blocking and screen monitoring software to hold yourself accountable (such as covenant eyes and net nanny), etc.

Contact with child or children

This is about how people make their initial contact with children online.

To avoid offending, think about:

- What was the situation when you began speaking to a child e.g. what platform were you on, how did the communication start etc.?
- What was motivating you to contact a child? What need are you seeking to meet? What other ways can you meet this motivation/need which are healthier and legal e.g. connecting with known adults offline?

What barriers can you put in place to ensure you do not contact a child online?

e.g., deleting certain apps; confirming someone's age before talking to them; identifying what needs this behaviour is seeking to meet and identifying other legal and healthy ways etc.

Grooming

Grooming is an on-going process that happens before and throughout online sexual communication with children. Building a child's trust for sexual purposes is a form of exploitation and is harmful to children.

To avoid offending, think about:

- How we know that sexual communication does not happen by accident, and involves a range of grooming behaviours.
- How your behaviours as an adult can influence children? Remind yourself that it is always an adult's responsibility to prevent communication between adults and children.

Hopefully, the barriers you identified for the previous stages have been put in place to prevent offending. However, it is always helpful to have strategies at every point of the offending cycle,

so that you know you can break this pattern of behaviour. Remember, you have control over your behaviour.

What barriers could you put in place to ensure you do not engage in grooming behaviours?

e.g., writing down the costs of the behaviour for children, yourself and your loved ones; thinking about the consequences of your actions such as how your family would react if they could see the conversation or you being arrested; blocking any apps or profiles which you know are risky for you; reminding yourself that it is always an adult's responsibility to stop communication between adults and children; and having a message or photo on your devices of what motivates you to not offend.

Sexual outcomes

This is the sexual behaviour itself, for example, the exchange of sexual videos and images; offline sexual contact. This includes one-off sexual encounters and sustained sexual contact with the same child or children over time etc.

To avoid offending, think about:

- The negative impacts of child sexual abuse on the victims and their families
- The negative long-term consequences for you and your family
- What need are you seeking to meet? What other ways can you meet this motivation/need which are healthier and legal e.g. connecting with known adults offline?

What barriers could you put in place to ensure you do not engage in sexual communication with children?

e.g., ending and blocking any contact you have with children; [exploring fantasy management](#) techniques to help manage urges to offend; identifying ways to get sexual pleasure in healthy and legal ways; seeking external support for problematic sexual behaviours; reminding yourself children can never consent and sexual conversations with children have damaging lifelong impacts for children.

Justifications

These are the things people say to themselves to justify their behaviour and to feel OK about it.

These might include:

- *blaming* the child – 's/he led me on!'
- *sexualising* the child – 's/he was so provocative', 's/he was sexually active anyway'
- *equating* children to adults, for example, in terms of consent and understanding.

The idea is that these justifications then make it more likely that the person will carry on with their behaviour, and so go back round the cycle, perhaps many times.

It is important to recognise these justifications, so that you can challenge them in the future. Once you have identified some of the justifications you used, you could consider a response to dissuade yourself from engaging in the behaviour in the future.

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 sexually communicated with children, consider if the examples below are relevant for you, as well as any others that you have identified, and add these to your justification table.

Justifications	Responses
<i>"S/he led me on."</i>	<i>"They are a child. They are not able to consent to the sexual communication."</i>
<i>"I'm only talking to them."</i>	<i>"These conversations are harmful to children. We know that the impact of these conversations can be profound and have lifelong impacts."</i>
<i>"They could stop if they want to."</i>	<i>"I'm the adult, it's my responsibility to stop. We know that children do not have the ability to have a complete understanding of consequences, and so it is my responsibility as an adult to stop harmful behaviours."</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.

Considering the child's perspective

Many people do not believe they are harming children when they communicate with them sexually on the internet, and can incorrectly blame the child. However, we know this is not true. Speaking to a child about sexually explicit content before they are emotionally developed has long-term, harmful consequences on the cognitive and sexual development of these children.

If you recognise using any justifications, it is important to think about the dynamics of your interaction or relationship with the children concerned. This can be really hard to do, as sometimes people feel ashamed of their behaviour when they look at it from the child's point of view. But, remember that this is a positive process, and considering the child's point of view may help you prevent inappropriate online behaviour going forward.

Find a quiet time to do the exercise below when you're feeling safe and supported.

Exercise 2: The child's perspective

Consider what you know about the child/ren you were interacting with and what you know about children generally. Think about the following discussion questions:

- What might have made it difficult for them to say 'no'? (e.g. worry/anxiety, lack of assertiveness, fear of the person or losing the relationship)
- What vulnerabilities did the child have? (e.g., unhappy home life)
- What responsibilities do all adults have towards children?
- How does a child's understanding of sexual contact, its meaning and consequences, differ from the understanding of adults?
- How able is a child to give informed consent to any form of sexual contact? (e.g. does a child fully recognise the risks and consequences of sexual contact)
- How could your interaction with the child have made them believe they held some responsibility for the chat?

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