

Sadistic Online Exploitation

The Australian Federal Police (AFP)-led Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) and its international law enforcement partners have identified Sadistic Online Exploitation as a growing global threat targeting children and young people. The ACCCE is warning the Australian community about the trend and providing advice on how to take action.

What is Sadistic Online Exploitation?

Sadistic Online Exploitation (SOE) is the deliberate and malicious use of the internet to harm, manipulate or exert control over others for personal pleasure, gratification, a sense of power, ideological beliefs or to corrupt victims and inflict ongoing harm. This will often incorporate alternative forms of psychological, emotional, or physical abuse through digital means.

SOE occurs when offenders from violent online groups use threats, blackmail and online manipulation to coerce victims into producing, sharing or live streaming acts of self-harm, animal cruelty, sexually explicit acts and in the most serious cases, suicide.

Key motivators for members of these online groups are to gain popularity, collect and share extreme violent online material, seek gratification, show allegiance, recognition or pleasure through the harm they cause their victims.

What we know

Previous cases highlight the risk of significant harm to children and young people, with identified victims experiencing severe trauma, psychological and physical harm, and in some cases, lead to suicide.

Offenders initiate contact with children and young people through publicly available online platforms such as gaming platforms, social media apps or online forums used by children and young people. Offenders begin by building online trust or a romantic relationship, exploiting a child or young person's natural need for connection. They offer false friendship or acceptance, then go on to manipulate and coerce victims into harmful, escalating behaviours designed to shame or isolate them.

Offenders use extortion and blackmail tactics such as threatening to swat or dox their victims, if they don't comply with their demands.

Doxing: *The action of obtaining and publishing personal identifiable information on the internet, usually for malicious intent*

Swatting: *The action of making a false emergency call to send armed police to someone's address*

This imbalanced exchange can prevent children and young people from recognising they are being abused and make them less likely to seek help. In some instances, children and young people are afraid to seek help for fear of getting in trouble or due to the lack of accessible support in their own lives.

Who is at risk?

Offenders are deliberately targeting vulnerable children and young people who face complex personal challenges and lack the support needed to navigate these difficulties safely. To date, all victims have identified as females exhibiting behaviours indicative of; low self-esteem, mental health disorders, history of self-harm, eating disorders or other attributes that may lead them to seek connection with others online.

Who are the offenders?

Offenders are primarily based in English-speaking nations and are typically males aged between 12 and 25. Offenders may be other children and young people who have been coerced into offending by others and may operate anonymously or under false identities, often as part of a wider online network.

These online networks operate as a collective of multiple subgroups engaging in, or facilitating, illicit and dangerous activities, predominately targeting vulnerable children and young people with the intention to both victimise and recruit them.

These subgroups are responsible for a range of offences involving child exploitation, violent extremism and cybercrime.

Offender behaviour and tactics include:

- Targeting children and young people via popular apps, games, and social media
- Building trust to form manipulating false relationships
- Using coercion, threats, and desensitisation
- Forcing victims to create and share explicit or violent content
- Escalating demands over time.

Recognise the warning signs



Potential warning signs that a child or young person is a victim of SOE could include:

- ▶ Signs of self-harm including carvings of symbols on their skin, bite marks and burns
- ▶ Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- ▶ Sudden withdrawal from family, friends, and/or usual activities
- ▶ Secretive online behaviour, or extended periods of use with online devices
- ▶ Use of extreme language, symbols and rejection of previously held morals

How you can help



Prevention through connection

Known victims are often isolated from common support systems such as friendship groups, school communities and stable family environments. Adults engaging with children and young people, especially those with existing vulnerabilities, are encouraged to maintain open and ongoing conversations around respectful and consensual relationships and to ensure they know where to go if they ever feel unsure or unsafe.

SOE thrives on secrecy and isolation. To help reduce the risk:

- ✓ Keep open and judgement-free lines of communication with children and young people
- ✓ Talk about respectful relationships and online safety from an early age
- ✓ Encourage critical thinking about online interactions
- ✓ Create an environment where children and young people feel safe to disclose concerns

If you need help

If you, or someone you know, is in immediate danger, call triple zero (000)

Step 1:

Stop the chat.

Step 2:

Take screenshots of the offending profile's username, profile picture and messages. Make sure the messages display the date and time of the messaging. If you can't do that, note the date and time manually.

Capturing this information helps police investigate the matter, or if we need to provide the information to the social media platform, they can pinpoint the exact communication.

Step 3:

Report and block the account on the platform.

This step helps us, help you. Platforms can be based anywhere, but reporting the profile to the platform helps the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) triage relevant cases back to Australia. Reporting accounts to the platform also leads to the automatic retention of data vital for investigation.

Step 4:

Screenshot your own profile username and picture. This helps the social media platform locate the communication between the two accounts.

Step 5:

Report to accce.gov.au

Support services

If you, or someone you know, needs support, reach out to these confidential Australian services:

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800

www.kidshelpline.com.au

Support for children and young people aged 5-25

QLife
1800 184 527

[www.qlife.org.au](https://www qlife.org.au)

Peer support for LGBTQ+ community

Headspace

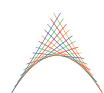
www.headspace.org.au

Youth mental health support

Step Together

www.steptogether.gov.au

Supports the community in overcoming violent extremism



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