

Understanding Sadistic Online Exploitation

A guide for parents and carers



Content warning: This document covers topics including online child sexual exploitation, self-harm and suicide, which may be distressing to readers.

What is it?

Sadistic Online Exploitation (SOE) is the deliberate and malicious use of the internet to harm, manipulate or exert control over others for:

- Personal pleasure or gratification
- Power and control
- Ideological beliefs
- Corruption of victims to inflict ongoing harm

This will often incorporate alternative forms of psychological, emotional and / or physical abuse through digital means.

Offenders often reach out to children and young people through common online spaces like gaming platforms, social media or messaging apps. Their goal is to build what looks like a genuine friendship or relationship by offering attention, acceptance or a sense of belonging.

Over time, these interactions become more controlling, manipulating or sexualised. Offenders may pressure or threaten the child or young person to share material. The material they are looking to elicit includes content depicting child abuse, torture, animal cruelty, acts of self-harm, and in most serious cases, suicide.

Who might need extra support

Some children and young people are more vulnerable to online risks than others. Offenders often seek out those who may feel isolated, lack confidence, or are searching for connection and belonging. They typically target children and young people aged 10–18, with a particular focus on females.

Other factors that can make children and young people more at risk include:

- A history of anxiety or depression
- Neurodivergence

- Minimal or no access to safe and trusted adults or peers
- A history of self-harm or eating disorders
- Marginalised identities based on gender, sexuality, race or cognitive abilities
- A fear of rejection and willingness to endure cruelty to avoid being left out

These are indicators of vulnerability, not causes. When children and young people feel alone or lack support, it's natural to seek belonging and connection online.

“ Connection and engagement is a critical prevention strategy.



Staying connected

Connection and engagement is a critical prevention strategy. Connection isn't just about being social, it's about maintaining healthy support systems that can provide consistent adult and peer support, nurture routine and create stability during times of personal change and vulnerability.

Maintaining school attendance and fostering hobbies or community-based activities can make a substantial difference as it reduces feelings of isolation and helps build positive relationships, lessening the influence of unsafe online spaces or people and creating safe opportunity for connection with trusted adults, friends and groups.

Some practical ways to support safe connections include:

- Encouraging involvement in school activities, clubs or peer support programs
- Linking with youth services, cultural or hobby groups that provide belonging and mentorship
- Supporting opportunities for family connection where safe and possible
- Working with health and education professionals to create individualised support plans

Top Tips

When a child or young person tells you something is not right online, try to keep in mind the below:

- Stay calm and listen. Let them talk without interruption or blame so they feel safe opening up
- Validate feelings like shock, worry, shame or confusion
- Stick to normal routines like school, eating and sleep. Routines can help settle anxiety and restore a sense of control
- Suggest breaks from online activities and add low pressure offline activities like going for a walk or cooking together
- Keep some positive online connections so they don't feel cut off

Making a report

If a child or young person is in immediate danger, call Triple Zero (000).

If you believe a child or young person is a victim of SOE, report it to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation at www.accce.gov.au/report

- Take screenshots of the offender profile's username, profile picture and messages. This will help with reporting and investigating. You may need to write the down the correct date and time manually.
- Report any unsafe or threatening behaviour to the platform where the interaction occurred.
- Block the offending account.

Where to get help

If you, or someone you know, needs support, reach out to these 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
Peer support for LGBTQI+ community
- **Headspace** | www.headspace.org.au
Youth mental health support
- **Step Together** | www.steptogether.gov.au
Supports the community in overcoming violent extremism