

Issue 2 | 6 February 2025

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One in four girls are sexually propositioned online before adulthood: What can we do to help?

Joint research from the Australian Government eSafety Commissioner and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has found that one in four girls are sexually propositioned online before adulthood. In some cases, this can start as young as age 11, and in most cases, involves strangers completely unknown to the child. Concerns about online safety continue to remain a priority for schools and families in many locations globally, not least seen through the development of new legislation such as the UK Online Safety Act (2023), a set of laws focussed around protecting children and adults online. This new Australian research, released in January, highlights the need to consider how we can support girls and young women to safely navigate online spaces.

This study shows that there is a concerning level of online sexual victimisation in Australia. Girls face a significantly higher risk of predatory approaches compared to boys, including both sexual solicitation and the non-consensual sharing of sexual images. While 3.8 per cent of boys in the study were victims of non-consensual image sharing, 10.9 per cent of girls were victims of this same act. The discrepancy in rates of solicitation by an adult are similarly alarming, with 7.6 per cent of boys affected as victims of sexual solicitation compared to 26.3 per cent of girls. Adolescents are most likely to perpetrate the non-consensual sharing of sexual images, while adults are most likely to engage in sexual solicitation of children and adolescents online. This includes both isolated incidents and cases where it repeatedly occurs.

Many online spaces can pose a risk to girls' safety, however, the eSafety and QUT report highlights some that are of higher risk. Social media, messaging platforms and gaming apps are all spaces being increasingly weaponised by predators, especially those platforms where children and adults are both online together. While these can be enjoyable spaces for children and can lead to positive experiences, there are likewise risks when predators use these spaces to target young people. Currently, girls are disproportionately affected by these risks. The research showed that girls are affected by online sexual solicitation by adults slightly earlier than boys, with attempts to solicit girls rapidly increasing as they reached adolescence. Girls were also nearly three times more likely than boys to be affected by online sexual victimisation.

All children, and especially girls, need positive tools to help them navigate the online world and build digital resilience. eSafety, Australia's online safety regulator, points out that "prevention is just as important as enforcement" and is urging families to urgently prioritise discussions about online safety. It is essential that girls are supported to develop confident literacy surrounding online experiences, sexuality and relationships in order to give them the skills necessary to stay safe online and know when to ask for help. This contributes to broader efforts that address gendered sexual violence and social norms. Maintaining an awareness of early adolescents' engagement with sexuality is also important to ensure girls are equipped with age-appropriate knowledge to navigate the risks they may face.

eSafety offers some strategies to approach this challenge. While it is suggested that government, schools, and

individual app, website and platform policies should be considered in order to better protect young people online, there are other suggestions that schools and families can use to help support girls who may encounter sexual predators online. A holistic approach to young people's safety online is important, involving both schools and families. It is also essential that proactive and preventative approaches are taken, with more targeted education for children and young people, families, educators and others working with children.

Schools can help by increasing young people's digital skills and literacy in both sexuality and relationships. Given the young age of girls impacted by sexual victimisation, this can include strategies and responses to use when approached by predators online, knowing when to seek help, understandings of consent, and safe digital practices that include education around activities such as sexting. Families can also be aware of the need for additional monitoring when girls are engaging in higher risk activities online. This includes live streaming, gaming, online and video chat, and any sharing of photos or videos. These risks are especially a concern in gaming platforms where multi-aged groups interact together.

Families can help girls further by encouraging open conversations and having an active role in children's online lives. It is important to keep conversations age appropriate to support learning, digital resilience and awareness of risks. Recognising both the positive and negative experiences of online platforms is important, and asking open-ended questions can help children feel comfortable talking about these experiences. Families can regularly review privacy and security settings on devices and apps and set up parental controls, and focus on finding a balance of supervision when using devices while developing independent use that is appropriate for each child's age.

You can read more about conversation starters, expert guidance and age-appropriate advice about online safety [here](#). More information on teaching online safety in schools can be viewed [here](#).
