

NCA issues urgent warning about 'sextortion'

- [Cyber crime](#)
- [Child sexual abuse](#)

The National Crime Agency has issued an alert to hundreds of thousands of education professionals following a considerable increase in global cases of financially motivated sexual extortion – a type of online blackmail widely known as 'sextortion'.

Sextortion involves people being forced into paying money or meeting another financial demand, after an offender has threatened to release nude or semi-nude photos of them. This could be a real photo taken by the victim, or a fake image created of them by the offender.

Specialists from the NCA's CEOP Education team have produced [the alert](#), which was issued to teachers across the UK today (Monday 29 April).

It gives advice about spotting the signs of this type of abuse, supporting young people and encouraging them to seek help. It also includes guidance to be disseminated to parents and carers on how to talk to their child about sextortion, and how to support them if they become a victim – aiming to take away the stigma surrounding the topic and, in turn, power away from those who wish to harm them.

The unprecedented warning comes after the number of global sextortion cases reported to the US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) more than doubled in 2023, rising to 26,718 compared to 10,731 the year before.

All age groups and genders are being targeted, but a large proportion of cases have involved male victims aged between 14-18. Ninety one per cent of victims in UK sextortion cases dealt with by the Internet Watch Foundation in 2023 were male.

These crimes can be perpetrated by organised crime groups based overseas, predominantly in some West African countries, but some are also known to be located in South East Asia.

They are motivated by making money quickly, rather than by sexual gratification, and in some cases have gone from initial contact to blackmailing their victim in under an hour.

Child victims have reported being:

- contacted by an online account that they do not know but appears to be another child or young person. They may also be contacted by a hacked account of a child or young person they do know, but the communication feels unfamiliar;
- quickly engaged in sexually explicit communications, which may include the offender sharing an indecent image first;
- manipulated or pressured into taking nude or semi-nude photos or videos;
- told they have been hacked and the offender has access to their images, personal information and contacts (whether this is true or not);
- blackmailed into sending money or meeting another financial demand (such as purchasing a pre-paid gift card) after sharing an image or video, or the offender sharing hacked or digitally manipulated/AI-generated images of their victim and making the threat of sharing them wider.

James Babbage, Director General for Threats at the National Crime Agency, said:

“Sextortion is a callous crime. Perpetrators have no concern for victims or the lives that might be destroyed in the process. Their sole motivation is financial gain.

“We are asking education professionals to help us raise awareness about this crime type, which is sadly increasing across the world. This alert is designed to guide them in supporting young people who may be targeted.

“Sextortion causes immeasurable stress and anguish, and we know there are adults and young people who have devastatingly taken their own lives as a result.

“A lot of victims feel responsible but we need them to know this is absolutely not the case; you are not to blame and help and support is available. As well as raising awareness with this alert, we want to encourage young people to report incidents to an adult they trust, the police or to the CEOP Safety Centre.”

Advice to parents and carers if their child says that someone is trying to trick, threaten or blackmail them online:

- **Don't pay, do stop contact and block:** you may be tempted to pay, but there is no guarantee that this will stop the threats. As the offender's motive is to get money, once you have shown you can pay, they will likely ask for more and blackmail may continue. If you have paid, don't panic but don't pay anything more. Help your child to stop all communication with the offender and block them on any accounts that they have been contacted on.
- **Avoid deleting anything:** try not to delete anything that could be used as evidence such as messages, images, telephone numbers, and bank account details.
- **Report to the police or CEOP:** call 101 or 999 if there is an immediate risk of harm to your child. Or you can use the [CEOP Safety Centre](#) to report any online blackmail attempts.

Adults can also support young people in getting their images removed using Childline and the Internet Watch Foundation's [Report Remove tool](#), the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's [Take It Down](#) tool, and reporting to the platform or app it has been shared on. Further information for parents and carers on how they can support their child can be found in the CEOP Education's [online blackmail](#) article.

Sextortion is:



Tom Tugendhat, Security Minister, said:

“Sextortion destroys lives. It is often driven by highly sophisticated organised crime groups who exploit vulnerable people for profit.

“It’s vital that technology companies take responsibility for the safety of their users by implementing stronger safeguards on their platforms.

“I would urge parents to talk to their children about their use of social media. Even sites that many assume to be safe may pose a risk.”

Susie Hargreaves OBE, Chief Executive of the IWF, said:

“Sextortion has become a major threat online in the last few years. This alert to schools is an absolutely crucial intervention in stemming this epidemic which has already ruined so many young lives. These criminals are cold-blooded, and do not even care when the shame and fear they inflict drives some children to take their own lives.

“We want children to know, however, they are not alone, no matter how lonely it feels, that there is a remedy, and a way to take control and fight back. The Report Remove tool we run with Childline is revolutionary and allows you to stop sexual imagery being shared or from going viral online. Please, if you are being targeted this way, reach out. It is not a hopeless situation, and we are here to help you.”

Richard Collard, Associate Head of Child Safety Online Policy at the NSPCC, said:

“Children who contact Childline because they are victims of ‘sextortion’ are often extremely distressed and don’t see a way out of their situation.

“When they experience this crime, they can often feel too scared or ashamed to make a report. It is important children know what has happened is never their fault, and we’d encourage any young person to speak to a trusted adult so they can get help and support.

“Children must be supported to spot signs of abuse, but the burden should not be on them to protect themselves from harm online. Tech companies must step up and actively tackle the threat of sexual extortion on their platforms by putting safeguards in place and identifying dangerous behaviour.”

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