

Conversation starters

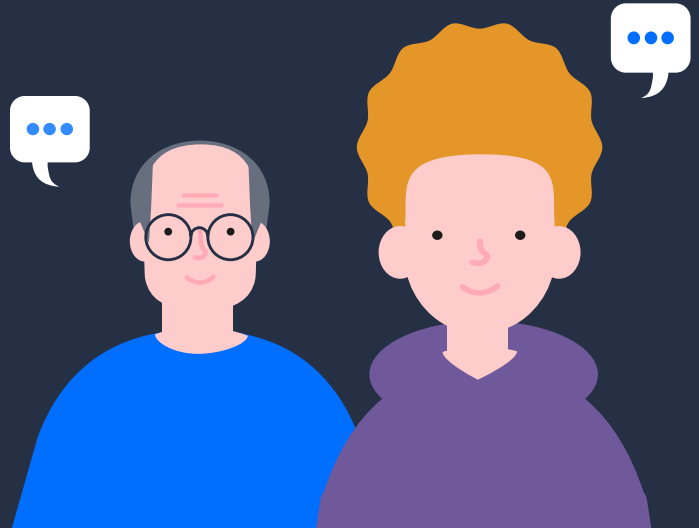
Tackling online abuse

internet
matters.org

Empowering young people to create safer online spaces

43% of teen girls say that being online does not make them happy.

From the normalisation of harassment to pressures they feel from social media, it's clear that girls need more support in the digital space.



What the research says

Finding joy



57%

of teen girls feel happy online

13-16-year-old girls highlight social connection as a major part of online enjoyment.

Apps like TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram help them connect with friends and new people with similar interests. This makes them feel 'less alone' and 'part of a community.'

Additionally, social media supports girls' creativity through content creation.

Online harassment



1/3

of 15-16-year old girls say a stranger has tried to contact them

Teen girls receive a number of hateful comments across social media platforms. These comments that target girls' appearances (e.g. clothes, weight and bodies) come from males rather than other girls, they say.

Girls also say they have received 'weird' or 'creepy' messages from men online. Some also mentioned receiving 'dick pics'. **One parent said receiving inappropriate messages from men is "so common, it's not noteworthy."**

Impacts on boys



49%

of boys say receiving sexual pictures or videos they don't want to see happens 'a lot' or 'sometimes'

Boys and girls alike face pressures to share nude images. For boys, they often feel pressure to get nudes from girls to share, but they can also be targeted.

[Ofsted's 2021 report](#) found that boys also report receiving sexual pictures or videos. **40% of boys said they felt pressure to share sexual images of themselves (compared to 80% of girls).**

Conversations to have with boys

When it comes to positive behaviour in the online space, different messaging is needed for both boys and girls.

For boys, these conversations should focus on:

- **calling out negative behaviour** and harassment when they see it;
- the **seriousness of abuse and harassment**, which is equal with offline forms.

Here are some conversations you can have with boys to tackle harassment girls face online and to keep digital spaces positive.

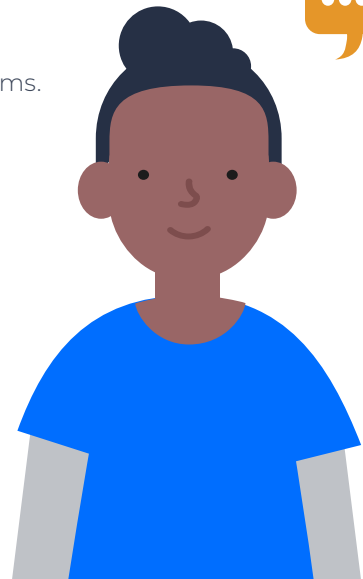
Conversation icebreakers

Have you ever seen anything online that made you feel uncomfortable for another person/group of people?

Here, you can explore what actions they took or didn't take and why. You can then also talk about what they could do instead.

Did you hear about ... ? What do you think about it?

Use a story in the news or something you've witnessed/heard about online to talk. This can draw out other experiences and encourage critical thinking about everyday issues.



Scenario-based chats

Imagine you see a comment about a girl's appearance that is negative or sexual in nature. What do you do?

These imagined scenarios can help young men think through realistic situations they might find themselves in. It can also help them re-evaluate their past actions or learn new ones.

Imagine that your friend shares an image of a girl with you without her permission. They make fun of her or sexualise her. What do you do?

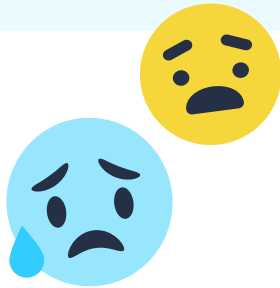
When it comes to sexual image-sharing, some boys feel pressure from others to get nude images from girls and share them with friends. This scenario can help explore those pressures and how to counter those pressures.



Appeals to their empathy

What emotions might someone feel when they go online to have fun but end up receiving hateful or sexual comments?

For these kinds of conversations with teens, it's often better to ask how 'someone' might feel rather than how 'they' might feel. Often, teen boys will shrug things off in a bid to seem unbothered. So, distancing techniques can help them brainstorm ways others might be affected.



Think of [a girl or woman they admire/are close to]. How would these kinds of comments or images affect them? How would that make you feel?

Comparing girls' experiences online to the experiences of a boy's mum, sister, aunt, friend or other important female in their life can help ground the situation in something real. Thinking about impacts on a sister, for instance, is easier to visualise than the impacts on a stranger.

Talking about solutions

What could boys and men do to make the online space safer for girls?

This critical thinking exercise can help them come to a positive solution on their own. Owning these solutions might make it easier for them to put them into action.



Have you ever seen someone stand up for another person online either in social media comments or elsewhere? How did it make you feel?

Reflecting on past experiences, even if it was only in passing, can help boys make connections between situations. This example doesn't just have to be related to girls either. Some other questions you might ask could be 'how did the victim feel afterwards?' Or 'what happened next?'



Conversations to have with girls

When it comes to talking with girls about harassment online, a key part is acknowledging rather than ignoring.

For girls, conversations should focus on:

- recognising that **harassment/abuse is not normal or okay**;
- **actions to take** to address it;
- the importance of **reporting the behaviour**.

Here are some conversations you can have with girls to address and tackle the harassment experienced online.



Tackling the normalisation of abuse

If someone sent a racist or cruel image to a friend, what would you do?

Sometimes, young women might not speak up for themselves, but they might speak up for a friend. The same might be true for non-gendered abuse. Framing harassment faced online with a different issue can help open the conversation up to girls' experiences online.

Can you think of a time where you ignored something instead of acting on it? Why? Could you have done something differently?

This reflection question doesn't need to be specifically about harassment or abuse of girls online. It can be pretending not to see someone they know in public, ignoring an instruction, scrolling past a video about something they don't agree with, etc. The point is to question why they would ignore rather than take an action to help shift their mindset towards being active rather than passive.

Why might someone ignore an issue that bothers them? Is that right?

Asking girls to think critically about the reasons behind 'ignoring' something can help them consider alternatives. If it's an issue of being considered too sensitive, you can also talk about the anonymity of reporting on platforms.



What could you do to empower other girls on social media when it comes to harassment and abuse many girls face?

Conversations about empowerment can help counter the behaviour that normalises harassment and abuse. You can talk about how empowerment means taking charge and standing up for themselves and others.



Taking action to stop abuse

Imagine a digital space where all girls feel comfortable and safe. What does it look like? How can you help that become a reality?

This kind of conversation can help young girls think about what a positive online space looks like. It can also encourage them to think about actions they could take to act against harassment and abuse.



If a friend shared that she was being harassed online, what advice would you give her?

Again, asking girls to think about advice they would give to someone else can help them brainstorm solutions that can support them as well. You might need to clarify those connections to recognise the impact of reporting.



Imagine you see a comment about another girl's appearance that is negative or sexual in nature. What do you do?

This scenario focuses on acknowledging the harassment or abuse girls see online that targets other girls or women. The importance here is not ignoring it, and instead calling it out and reporting it.



Why might a girl ignore the harassment or abuse they face online?

Conversations about the 'why' behind behaviours can help girls think critically about how expectations can influence them. They might feel 'dramatic' or like they're 'overreacting', which is generally based on learned stereotypes. This conversation can help girls break down these barriers and encourage them to report behaviour that makes them uncomfortable.



More resources to support young people



What is sextortion?

Guidance for parents and young people



Sexting: Facts & advice hub

Information about sexting and preventing harm.



Teens' online dating & relationships

Advice on navigating digital relationships with teens.



Online child-on-child abuse

Guides for parents, teachers and young people.



Young people's advice on talking about sexual harassment



What is misogyny?

Guidance on the issue of misogyny and how to counter hate.

Get support



Childline

Helpine, chat and forums to support wellbeing.



The Mix

Helpine, chat and forums for 12-25s.



Nude image of you online? We can help take it down.

Report Remove

Tool for under-18s to confidentially report and remove sexual content of themselves from the internet.



Take It Down

Tool to remove nude, partially nude or sexually explicit content of yourself taken when you were under 18.



Explore more research

- Teen girls' experiences of harm online (Internet Matters)
- Young people's experiences of online misogyny and image-based abuse (Internet Matters)
- Research into self-generated child sexual abuse material (Internet Matters)
- Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges (Ofsted)
- Understanding and combatting youth experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse (UCL)

Visit [internetmatters.org](https://www.internetmatters.org) for more advice

[InternetMatters](https://www.facebook.com/InternetMatters)

[@InternetMatters](https://www.youtube.com/@InternetMatters)

[@internetmattersorg](https://www.instagram.com/internetmattersorg)

[@im_org](https://twitter.com/im_org)

[Internet Matters Ltd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/InternetMattersLtd)

[@InternetMatters_org](https://www.pinterest.com/InternetMatters_org)

**internet
matters.org**