tes Essential weekly intelligence for the education professional

tes

For the 13 October issue of Tes, we produced an online safeguarding special issue. The response from teachers was huge, and we received multiple requests to provide the content in a format that would make it easy for schools to distribute it to parents. We believe this is a vitally important issue, so we have decided to release all the content for free in this downloadable PDF

SAFEGUARDING SPECIAL REPORT

Every UK police force is struggling to combat online sexual abuse

The warnings to children are not getting through

They need your help

Editorial

Online sexual abuse is real. Every child is at risk. Don't look away

Our cover feature this week is one of the most harrowing we have ever run. It may shock you – in fact, it should shock you. Because the situation we find ourselves in is profoundly shocking.

The Metropolitan Police, like every other force in the UK, is struggling to get to grips with the growing menace of the sexual abuse of children online. The situation is so worrying that our commissioning editor, Jon Severs, was given unprecedented access to two of its teams – the Predatory Offenders Unit and the Sexual Exploitation Team – in an attempt to convey the seriousness of the problem (see pages 4-13).

The children that these teams of officers encounter through their work will attend your schools – both secondary and primary. In fact, the victims in online cases are getting younger, they say, and are now regularly as young as just eight years old.

Sadly, sexual abuse of children is nothing new; it's always been around. What has changed is how it has been amplified through the advent of the world wide web, apps and social media, which have provided new ways to violate and humiliate.

Most of today's parents will have had no childhood experience of the internet, no memory of warnings or stories from their own parents to pass on. Awareness of danger is for many limited to the strangers on the outside. They have little idea of the dangers posed by strangers to their children when they are inside, seemingly safe and secure in their bedrooms. In fact, few of us do.

But when children go online, they are opening the door to a world of predators, not all adults – young people themselves under the age of 18 are abusers, too. And they are doing so with little understanding of the dangers and with little information.

"You would never send a child to the park on their own with no advice. You would never let them cross the road with no advice. We warn them about strangers. But the internet? Smartphones? We just let them do it," says Dan, an officer with the Met Police Predatory Offenders Unit.

The problem, the police emphasise, is not with the internet or smartphones, but with human behaviour.

And although they recognise it is not schools' job to help them combat this, more often than not, they say, it is teachers that can have the biggest impact.

Thus far, all efforts to deal with the problem of online abuse have been centred on controlling access to the internet, through limiting use of smartphones or through parental controls.

That is clearly not working (see figures, page 11). So what should we be doing? We can't simply put tech back in its box. Of course, we need to educate children about the dangers and trust them to make the right decisions. But, tragically, sometimes even that will not be enough, as Lorin LaFave – mother to a son who was groomed online and killed – knows to her cost (see pages 14-17).

According to both the police and Lorin, the problem is a societal one. Culturally, we have ideas about pornography, about what a victim or a paedophile looks like, that are more dangerous than any technology.

The police know that teachers cannot shift culture alone. But it's a start. Teachers, they say, are trusted, are seen as a link to adult reality and children listen to them.

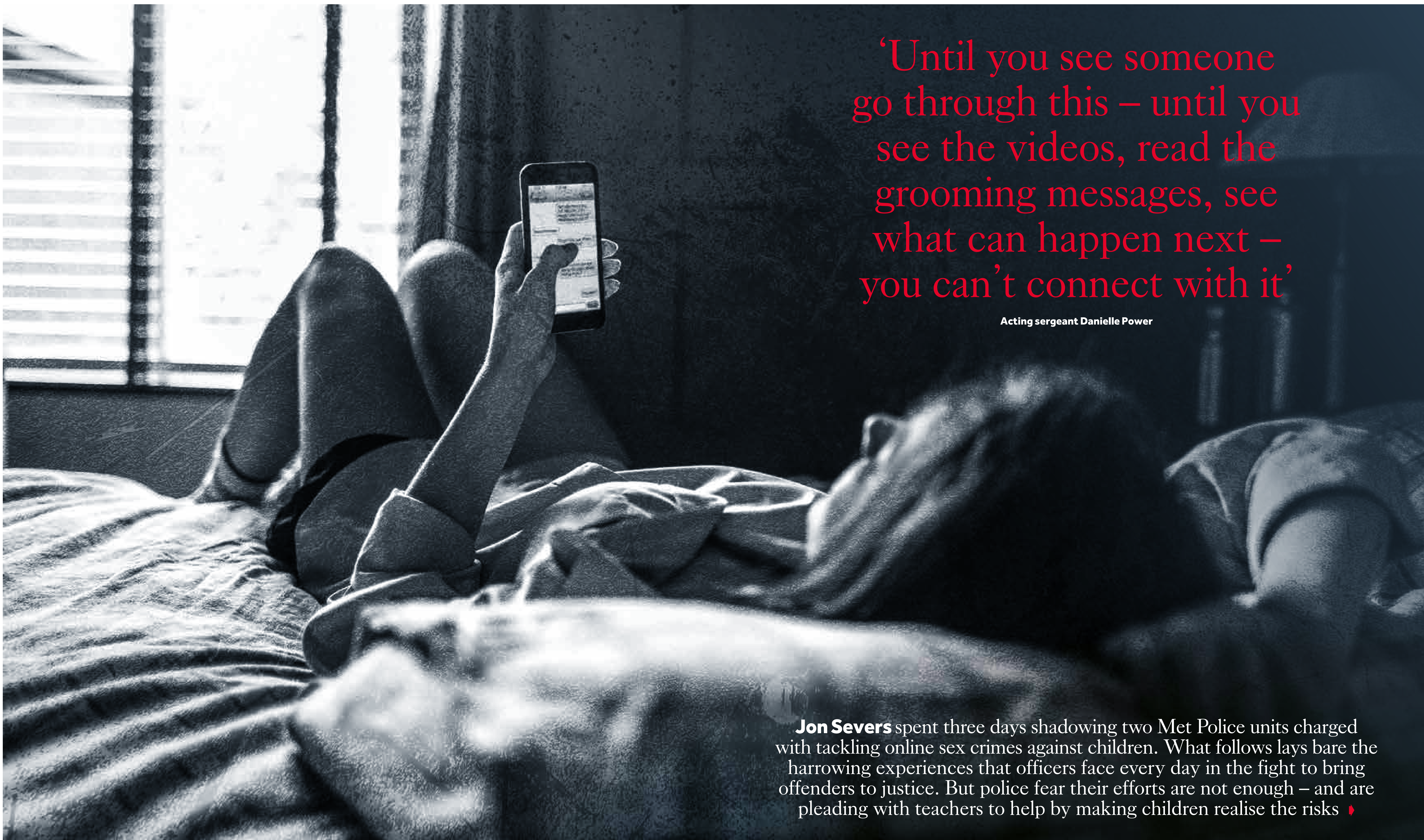
But teachers – and all of us – need to understand the real dangers of the online world, to understand that it can be even more dangerous than the outside world and to be scared. Really scared. That is why our feature is so graphic. And that is why we have asked Lorin to tell her story.

All of this may happen in the virtual space but it's real. Very real. And shocking. Please don't look away.

@AnnMroz

ALAMY

Children have never been at more risk online than they are now. Attempts to protect them through education are failing. What follows in this special issue may make you uncomfortable – much of what is included is shocking and upsetting – but only by facing the reality of the situation can we begin to take the necessary steps to ensure young people are safe



ALAMY - IMAGE POSED BY MODEL

‘Until you see someone go through this – until you see the videos, read the grooming messages, see what can happen next – you can’t connect with it’

Acting sergeant Danielle Power

Jon Severs spent three days shadowing two Met Police units charged with tackling online sex crimes against children. What follows lays bare the harrowing experiences that officers face every day in the fight to bring offenders to justice. But police fear their efforts are not enough – and are pleading with teachers to help by making children realise the risks

Dan fiddles with the cast on his left arm. It's there for arthritis and he claws at its end, where the blue material meets his hand. It's partly a nervous tick, the clawing. Mostly, he does it when he thinks I am uncomfortable – or when he thinks I am about to be uncomfortable – with what he has said or is about to say. Over the course of our conversation, he journeys to the end of the cast with the fingers of his right hand again, and again, and again.

You see, our discussions are very uncomfortable. Dan – we can't use his real name for security reasons – is one of the most experienced officers working within the Metropolitan Police (Met) Predatory Offenders Unit (POU), or the paedophile unit, as you or I might know it. What he sees every day is what most people would never want to see, what most people could not see without a severe and lasting impact on their mental health.

"I have to see the baby rapes, I have to see the abuse of children. Every day," he says. "We get psychological support. But everyone has a limit. Some may break along the way."

Over the past five years, Dan has witnessed a change in the pictures he sees. Where once it was clear children in the images were under duress, or you had adults in the frame abusing the children, suddenly you had self-generated images: children's selfies. And it wasn't just pictures, but videos.

"These children are exposing themselves," Dan explains. "There are no adults in the picture [and in some cases] there are children touching children. The only time you see an adult is when you see the little square in the corner of the screen – that's the person they are talking to via the webcam, and that is usually a man masturbating."

The internet changed things. Then broadband changed things even more. Not just how children could be abused, but the nature of the abused and the abuser. Now, anyone can become an abuser; now anyone can be abused; and now, often, neither see themselves in those categories.

For some, online sexual abuse is now just "being a teenager" – it's even, as one victim put it, "a bit of a laugh".

This is why I was sat in an office with Dan, on the sixteenth floor of the Met building near Earl's Court in central London. It's why I spent three days shadowing the POU and its sister unit, the Sexual Exploitation Team (SET). It's why I am writing this article.

ALAMY

The Met – indeed, every police force in the UK – is worried about online sexual abuse and the fact that it's often a pathway to physical sexual abuse. The messages of warning to children are not getting through. The seriousness and the prevalence of the offences are not getting through.

The police want help.

They want teachers to help.

Dangers of Snapchat

Detective inspector Dave Kennett reads through the case sheet that his colleagues have prepared. On it are 11 crimes that have been reported overnight in the Met police jurisdiction and that have been selected as possible cases that may fall under his team's remit to investigate, rather than that of the borough police. As head of the SET, he's looking for a particular type of case.

"Exploitation: is there a power imbalance in the relationship?" he explains. "That could be because of age, because there are drugs or money involved, because the boy is the school captain of the football team, the boy could be a gang member. The definition is quite subjective and it is up to us to try to interpret the law."

Every single case on this list has an online element to it – the police include anything involving social media and the internet in this category. Nine out of the 11 cases originated on, or were facilitated by, messages on Snapchat. Several involve rape. Kennett ends up accepting all but one as his team's responsibility.

This is normal, he says. The number of cases that make it past the borough police to his door averages about 10 per day. Often, it's teenage girls being groomed by older men, but it's just as likely to be peer-to-peer, where offender and victim are of similar age. Almost every case has an online element to it.

The victims in these online cases are getting younger, Kennett says. They are now regularly as young as eight years old.

To be clear: these are primary-aged children who are either groomed by strangers via their phone and in chatrooms, and who then send explicit pictures and videos of themselves to those strangers; or these are

So you think you know what a typical victim and offender look like?

You probably have a picture in your head of what an offender looks like. And you probably think you know what makes a child vulnerable to being groomed, or the type of child that would send an explicit image of themselves to another person.

You're almost certainly wrong on all counts.

Both boys and girls can be victims, from every section of society, every background and every state of mental health.

"Any child or young person who has access to the internet is a potential victim," says detective inspector Dave Kennett. "There is no 'type' of child or young person this happens to online.

"Just because they're from a good home with loads of money, or if they are outwardly confident, or a high-achiever – they can still be a victim. It is classless, and it is across the cultures."

Offenders, too, do not always match the stereotype. They can be fathers, brothers, sons, policemen, teachers, doctors or even children themselves.

Police officer 'Dan' explains that some offenders have always had, and always will have, an attraction to children. And then there is the new type of offender, born out of the same societal shift that has made children more likely to become victims.

"You arrest some people and they now say, 'Thank you for stopping me, help me,'" says Dan. "These are offenders who have become overexposed to porn – some will masturbate seven or eight times a day, at their desk, at work. They start getting erectile dysfunction when viewing the more 'normal' porn. Offenders talk about this a lot. So they try to find harder stuff. They move on to threesomes, then BDSM [bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism], and eventually they get to bestiality. Eventually, some start looking at children."

At the extreme end of the spectrum, the addiction can be grotesque. "You have these guys in their masturbatoriums," explains Dan. "They sit there with tissues that are soiled and they have wee bottles and some have buckets they have defecated in. These guys believe any time not masturbating is wasted time."

And the abuse can go beyond sex. "Sometimes the abuse reaches the point that the offender will ask the child to cut themselves, to write the offender's name with a razor blade on their arm," he reveals.

Dan draws a parallel with domestic violence: it becomes about control.

You can't stop those who have always been attracted to children from being so, he believes, but he does think you can help new offenders to change – if you get the chance: the suicide risk among those caught downloading, distributing or creating explicit imagery of children is among the highest of all types of offender.

children sending each other explicit images and being exploited as a result.

Kennett reels off examples from memory. He has plenty of them. A nine-year-old girl groomed via Instagram, who sent naked pictures of herself to an adult male; an 11-year-old boy who was groomed in less than 20 minutes via Instagram, and sent explicit images of himself to a "girl" of 13 (in reality, a suspected adult male paedophile, though the case is unsolved); a 12-year-old girl who sent explicit images to another 12-year-old, which were then passed around the school.

These cases, and more like them, add to the numerous examples of older children who have been groomed, who have shared explicit images and video via social channels or chatrooms. There are also the cases in which children have sent images and videos voluntarily.

And then there are the cases where it is children – those under the age of 18 – doing the grooming.

"You get young offenders," explains detective inspector Philip Royan, head of the POU. "In a couple of cases, I have found a vast array of imagery of young girls on a young person's computer."

It may surprise you that a child of 8 or 9 – maybe even younger – could be groomed via the internet in less than the time it takes for you to read this magazine. And it may surprise you that a predatory offender (ie, someone who seeks out such images and manipulates others to get them) can be a child. This does not fit with the stereotypes of older teens simply making mistakes or old men in flasher macs with bags of sweets in their pocket. But that's the thing with online sexual abuse, says Kennett: you have to forget everything you thought you knew about it.

"Online is different [to old-style contact abuse]," he explains. "We need to get rid of those perceptions of contact abuse when we are talking about online exploitation."

To do that, you don't just have to start from scratch with how you envisage an offender, but also with how you imagine a victim. It's about resetting what you thought was safe and what you feared. It's about recognising just how messed up things have become – and taking some collective blame for it.

Becoming a victim

Every creation or distribution of a sexually explicit image, or video, of a child is a crime, but there are many different circumstances in which such a crime can take place.

At one end of the spectrum, you have two teenagers in a relationship who share explicit material of themselves exclusively with each other. That is a crime, but not one that the police will typically pursue.

"If they share images between them, and they are not shared to others and there is no exploitation, there is a crime, but who do we arrest? Who do we give a sexual offences record to?" asks Kennett.

"We are not in the business of criminalising teenage sexual discovery."

A step up from that is a child sending an explicit image of themselves to another person with whom they are not in a relationship, and where there has been no grooming or exploitation – the receiver of that image is usually a member of their peer group. If the person receiving that image does nothing with it, then again it is unlikely to arrive on a crime sheet. But if that image is shared, you may begin to see some police involvement.

Then you have those cases in which someone is actively seeking explicit material. This could be between children of the same age. Kennett says this is often about blackmail, where the aim is to offer non-distribution of the images in return for the (usually) girl doing something they don't want to do: to have sex or engage in some other sexual practice with the holder of the image; hold drugs or weapons for a gang; or provide access to other girls. It could simply be about bullying, too, he says.

The offenders may groom their victim, or they may get the images through other means (coercion, hacking, stealing from friends' phones, etc).

Finally, on the far end of the spectrum are predatory offenders. Here, an adult offender will groom a victim to get an image or video, and then use that as leverage for further explicit material generation or, in the most extreme cases, to engineer a meeting for sexual contact with the child.

You may not be shocked by the first two categories. The idea that young people send each other explicit images of themselves is now almost accepted as part of growing up. Many adults do it, too. But Dan talks extensively about how the desensitisation to sexual imagery or acts leads to the problems we see at the more extreme end of exploitation – the latter two categories mentioned above. Porn is to blame, he says.

"Social attitudes have changed," he explains. "In the past, if I wanted to see some porn, I would have to buy a magazine and I would have to use those images time and time again. Those images, which were very 'vanilla', would then make an imprint on how I viewed women as I grew up and how I viewed sex.

"Now, as a teenager, you have porn sites with hundreds of not just images, but full videos, and those videos are in different categories of sex. They may include threesomes, anal sex, bukkake, scat. That makes those things mainstream."

ALAMY

Kennett explains that this leads to replication in teenagers' own lives. "It is now the norm that sexual activity will take place between two young people and they will film it," says Kennett. "It is the norm to take explicit pictures of yourself."

Dan adds: "We see a lot of bathroom shots, guys and girls exposing themselves – these kids share them with each other."

The omnipresence of porn and society's reaction to it – along with the technology to make videos and images being in the hands of most children – has not just made the creation of sexual images and video normal, but made niche types of sex mainstream.

Even schools have stopped being shocked. Dan cites an example in which parents raised concerns at a school about their daughter sending explicit images to another student, who in turn distributed them to others in the year group. The response was: this is normal behaviour, don't worry, it's teenage experimentation, it will blow over, we have some great PSHE resources we can share...

Just think about the message that all of this conveys, he says. Think about how this acceptance, this normalisation, influences the behaviour of teenagers.

From a victim's perspective

For example, let's look at peer-to-peer abuse from the perspective of the victim, where the offender and victim are the same age or very close in age. You are 13 years old and a boy in your year (it is almost always a male offender) asks for an image of you exposing yourself. You do it, because everyone does it, right? He says you are pretty, he says he likes you. It's just a laugh, just one picture.

And then you send it. And then he says he is going to send the image to your friends, to your parents. Unless...

Another example, and this time there's a predatory offender: you're on a social media platform or in a chatroom, or you are playing games online, and a message pops up from what seems to be a young girl or boy, and she or he is saying you look great, really pretty, and they want to see more of you – can you send them a picture? They'll send you some pictures back.

You don't know them, but everyone does this. This is normal, right? You send it. It's just a bit of fun. You send more, and then they ask for videos and you send those, too.

If you're lucky, your parents might spot the messages at this stage and report them, or a friend will. But when the SET officers

Catching a paedophile

It is incredibly difficult to catch a predatory offender. The police are usually reliant on the victim telling someone what is going on, or the parents discovering messages and making a report.

"I would suspect there are many, many cases we never see, but where exploitation is happening – be that because the child does not see it as exploitation or they are too ashamed to tell someone," says detective inspector Dave Kennett.

Often, the child will not want to cooperate. The police cannot force them to unlock their phone to see any conversations. But even if the police do gain access, they often only have a URL or username to go on – and getting the personal details behind those can take months. Social media companies are not set up to respond to the large volume of requests they receive from police forces around the world, and legal complications arise due to contrasting laws in different countries. It can take six months to get one email address.

The situation is further complicated if the grooming occurs on a platform such as Kik.

"Kik – this is a big problem," says Kennett. "It is a chat app that is encrypted and it is very, very difficult to track offenders. So what we see a lot is that the first stages of grooming happen on Instagram or Snapchat, and then as soon as a rapport is built, they transfer the chat to Kik. Kik does help [the police] where it can, but it is very, very tough to get the information."

A lot of the time, offenders are successfully convicted following "old-fashioned police work", according to Kennett (the exact methods of which are kept secret in order to avoid 'instructing' paedophiles), but teachers can help increase the conviction rate.

"For us to be able to do our jobs, we need to know what was said, when it was said, and on which platform and device. Very often [a child] will talk to a social worker or a teacher about the exploitation and we need them to get this information. We need to work more closely with those people, and they need to be more aware of how crucial they can be to investigations," he says.

Acting detective sergeant Danielle Power adds that victims are often unwilling to disclose details, but if teachers are patient, information will emerge. "The victims do realise [what has happened] eventually," she says. "But what they need to come to that conclusion is someone they can trust, and the space with that person to spend the time thinking it over. Teachers are key here – they already have that trust. You have to keep being there, keep going back to them and at some point they will likely say something to you."

What is the scale of the problem?

ALAMY

Reported cases of child sex exploitation

Police force	2014	2015	2016
Avon and Somerset (May-Apr)	829	1,055	1,215
Cambridgeshire (Aug-Jul)	NA	175	215
Devon			102
(CSE flag only introduced Aug 2015 and force stresses this is probably an underreported figure, as officers get used to the new terminology)			
Dorset (Aug-Jul)	37	110	117
Dyfed Powys	130	140	151
(cases with mobile phones not included)			
Lancashire	N/A	529	843
London Metropolitan	615	721	1,121
West Midlands	105	181	249
West Yorkshire (Aug-Jul)	529	655	765

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) also provides an annual update on its work and its latest report stated the following:

57,335 The number of URLs in 2016 confirmed as containing child sexual abuse imagery, having links to the imagery or advertising it

55,738 The number of reports to the IWF hotline in 2016 in which the person believed they were reporting child sexual abuse imagery

28 The percentage of those reports that correctly identified child sexual abuse imagery

53 The percentage of children in the images assessed as being aged 10 or younger

45 The percentage of children in the images assessed as being aged 11-15

Source: bit.ly/IWFReport2016

intervene, they say the children are embarrassed, but they rarely perceive the seriousness of the situation.

"Because it is not physical, because it is all online, it is not real to them," says Danielle Power, acting detective sergeant in the SET. "They just do not see the danger."

She says she has dealt with many cases in which the victim even says they think the situation is funny.

If this activity does not come to the attention of the police, then it goes one of two ways, says Kennett: "The [offender] will admit to being a horrible 50-year-old and will say I am going to send these pictures to your mum or friends, and now I want you to do *x* or *y*. Or they just keep going, they just want the images, and they keep going."

In one case the team worked on, the offender sent an 11-year-old child a video of what he wanted her to do. It was a sexually explicit video. And it was a video featuring another 10- or 11-year-old child.

Yet another scenario: you are 15 years old and someone contacts you to tell you they are a modelling agent. They tell you that you could be a model. They ask you to send them some images. They tell you it needs to start with some glamour stuff. And you agree, it can't do any harm. Then they tell you it needs to be porn – it's great money, a great place to start out, everyone does it. No one will see it, it will be distributed abroad. And you do that, too, because those videos – you've seen plenty of them – seem harmless. Maybe even glamorous. You're safe in your room – they can't get you. Everyone does it.

Beware the child facilitators

One area of grooming that is rarely spoken about is the way in which paedophiles can use children they have already groomed to groom others.

"There are cases where the original victim, who may not be particularly vulnerable, then passes that offender to her friends who are more vulnerable, and that offender then has more power over those victims," says detective inspector Dave Kennett.

"You get female facilitators," adds acting detective sergeant Danielle Power. "That can be quite common. You will get girls that are groomed and then they groom other girls to be part of that suspect's group."

And 'Dan' says you also have to be aware that adults can be groomed and are often used by paedophiles to get to children.

"They abuse the children for the paedophiles and take pictures and videos, or they hand over the children," he says.

Power had a case like that. The "modelling agent", posing as a female, was a man in his twenties living with his parents. He'd tricked countless girls into creating explicit material.

Sometimes the approach is less subtle, she adds. "A man was getting girls to strip on a website called AdultWork – he handled everything, including the payment from the website that was meant to go to the girls," she recalls. "Rather than the girls being paid after 28 days from the website, he would pay them himself in advance. And he would give them extra money, so saying something like, 'Here is 500 quid for a holiday.'

"He would then say 'You now owe me £700' and tell them they had to be recorded having sex with him, so they could upload the video in order to earn the money back to pay him. One victim was 16. [The offender] put a deposit down on a flat, he gave her drugs, and the videos just got worse and worse. It was violent, extremely explicit."

One final example: you are in a chatroom and a message pops up. You open it to find a video of a man masturbating, asking you to expose yourself. (This is what some offenders do now: it's a numbers game, and if they don't get a hit, they move on. After all, there are plenty of other girls on social media.) It's no longer shocking to see a man masturbating on screen because you've seen material like that before. You may have even seen classmates doing it. And it's normal to expose yourself, too, right? It's only online. It's harmless. It's only a bit of fun.

"Sometimes the kids watch and think it is a laugh, and the person will ask them to expose themselves, and often they do," says Dan.

Talking about the risk

Then he tells me about large groups of children creating explicit material together. He saw something recently that shows just how bad things have become.

"The most I have seen is nine girls in the same room," says Dan. "And they are kissing each other, doing things to each other, while a man masturbates on his webcam. And the girls are saying things like "Yeah, go on, look, he's wanking', and then they are saying 'wank over me', and they are taking their clothes off and touching each other. These are girls aged 9, 10, 11, 12."

He tries to find the words to describe just how horrific this was, but gives up.

And then, after a long pause, he says: "We really need to get a grip on this."

We've told children to be careful. We've told them more than once. Some children may even parrot the warnings back to you, those tales of danger, snippets of advice, those stories of when things go wrong. But how much have we really communicated? How much detail have we really gone into – as parents, as teachers, as a society?

Because children don't seem to realise that the pictures and videos they send to a boyfriend – or a would-be boyfriend, an online groomer or a random man on a social media platform – could end up all over the internet, shared between paedophiles on specialist websites, on bestiality websites, on gore websites.

Dan, Kennett, Power and the others have to sit through graphic videos of people having sex with animals, and they have to trawl through videos of things such as Mexican drug cartels decapitating a rival with a chainsaw. Because that's the sort of site on which paedophiles hang out. That's the sort of place where they swap selfies and videos. It's where that sort of thing is acceptable.

Children don't seem to realise you can never delete the images, that they exist everywhere and anywhere simultaneously – that they may resurface at any time. Dan explains that the same images crop up over and over again. The police delete them, they resurface – it's a cycle that never ends.

Children don't seem to realise that it is not all normal, the things they see in porn, the things they do to each other, the things they send to each other. They'll realise later, when they get into a real relationship. They'll recognise how serious it really was. But now?

Children don't seem to realise how much information about themselves they are giving to an offender. "They will talk about who their friends are, where they go to school, where they have been. They even send pictures of themselves in their school uniforms," says Kennett. And they don't know that when they send an image or video from one phone to another while the location settings are on, some simple software can tell the offender exactly where they are located. They don't know that all of this might mean that the offender knows where their bedroom is, that the offender can watch the bedroom, that the offender can see when they leave, when they arrive, when they are alone.

Finally, children don't seem to realise that simply sending a naked photo of themselves to a stranger, or to someone they thought was a friend, someone they thought they loved, might eventually result in a rape. It might end in a situation where they want to take their own life. It might, in the most extreme cases, eventually result in murder. It's rare, but it's not as rare as you might think – or hope.

"Self-harm and suicide are a risk. There are many documented cases of this," says Kennett. He urges people to watch a video message by Canadian teenager Amanda

Todd (bit.ly/AmandaToddYouTube), who went on to commit suicide after being exploited online.

But maybe children do realise it. Maybe they are aware of everything that has been documented in this feature. And maybe they still do it because they don't believe they will become one of Kennett's cases, one of Dan's cases, one of Power's cases.

So some blame the kids. The attitude that we as adults did all we could, that this was unstoppable, even that "she was asking for it" is far too common, says Kennett. "The victim-blaming can happen across the board – police, social services, schools – and we guard against that, we watch for it, we make sure that does not happen here," he says.

Taking responsibility

But Power still sees it in the eyes of juries, when a girl is kicking off while on the stand, full of bravado, full of anger, full of "this has not affected me, I don't care". They don't see beyond that.

And we are quick to blame the social media companies, too: they let this happen. They provide the link. If it wasn't for them, our children would be safe.

But Dan says it's not the fault of Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram or anything else.

"Yes, there is a moral obligation [for social media companies to help], and many do actually help us, but are they the problem? In reality, how can Google really control it?" he asks. "We have to get out of the blame culture. We are blaming a commercial organisation for human behaviour. We are taking aim at the wrong place."

And it's definitely not the fault of the children, he says: "Something has gone wrong. And it is not the children's fault. We have to fix this, not blame them."

It's no one's fault but our own, he stresses. So what can we do?

First we need to recognise that there is no profile of a victim: they could be as young as 5 or 6, and they may not be a vulnerable child, but the top-set girl with all the friends and all the confidence (see box, page 35).

And then we have to recognise that we have opened the door to an environment in which children think all of this is OK, and we need to find a way to close it. Or at least to manage that environment.

"You would not send a child to the park on their own with no advice," says Dan. "You would not let them cross a road without advice. We warn them about strangers. And for all these things, we drill them on the rules, on safety until we are satisfied they are safe. And even if the parents do not do that, there is extensive advice about all that in school. We have all this covered. But the internet? Smartphones? We just let them do it."

He says we all need to talk more openly about the dangers, as well as the need to scaffold internet access; and we should restrict use of phones until we know children are as safe as they can be.

We also need to be unafraid to talk about sex and porn, highlighting the myths, explaining that all those videos on all those porn sites are not reality, and that this thing you watch can create multiple issues, that you can even become addicted.

"We need to get over the embarrassment," says Dan, "to talk to children about pornography and say to them, 'You are going to see things that are not normal – threesomes, being tied up etc – and these are not things everyone does, but porn sites make it seem like they are.' We can't do that if we are too embarrassed to talk about sex."

And we should not hide away from what our children can be exposed to.

"The information has to be age-appropriate, age-relevant," says Dan. "We should be warning children at all ages, but doing it in the right way."

ALAMY – IMAGE POSED BY MODEL

You might argue that this is not the job of a teacher. The police have a lot of time for that opinion.

The officers at the Met have all sat their own children down – they have restricted their internet access, scaffolded their knowledge of the net and talked to them about porn.

"My son would definitely say I am overprotective," admits Kennett. But he says sometimes teachers are the only ones young people will listen to.

"The teachers, I think they are in a very difficult situation," he says. "It takes time to learn all this stuff – time they don't have. This is not their job, this is the job of parents. But the problem – or the reality – is that it is often the teacher that is the most trusted person in a young person's life."

He adds that they may be the only person willing to have this conversation, too.

But it's just words, right? After all, schools have tried. Teachers have got great PSHE resources, great safety advice in the computing curriculum. They've done their absolute best.

It has no effect.

Well, ask yourself, says Dan, did you really mean it? Did you really understand it? Did you go far enough? Did you feel it?

"It is not about sex education, about internet-safety advice, about firewalls on the school wi-fi," he says.

It's not about a new SRE curriculum.

The officers stress that words are not enough on their own.

An emotional connection to what you are talking about is key to children understanding how serious this is, as well as keeping them safe.

This is why this feature has detailed so many cases and why the details have been so graphic. It is why we have given Lorin LaFave four pages to tell the story of how her son, Breck, was groomed and murdered (see page 44). And it's why the Met has opened up to us.

If teachers and parents – society as a whole – do not understand how serious the danger is, if they do not understand what really happens and if they don't get scared – if they don't fear the pain of this happening to someone they love – then how can we expect children to take it seriously?

"Is it put across in schools in a procedural way? Do [teachers or parents] do it just because they have to? Without that emotional connection – without that deeper understanding – I don't know if it will have an impact," says Power.

"Until you see someone go through this – until you see the videos, read the grooming messages, view the videos that are extorted out of these girls, see what can happen next – you can't really understand it, you can't connect with it and you cannot be passionate with it.

"That's the problem: as a society we can be very similar in our reactions, as the girls are – it's online, no harm done. But it is harmful. It ruins lives."

Jon Severs is commissioning editor of Tes.
With thanks to the Metropolitan Police – and DI Kennett, acting sergeant Power and 'Dan' in particular – for their time, cooperation and for enabling this feature to take place

The personal toll on police officers

The officers who work in the Sexual Exploitation Team and Predatory Offenders Unit are carefully chosen.

"You are screened before you come into the role," says detective inspector Dave Kennett. "And you get early screenings to ensure you are able to cope. We get occupational health support."

He says he is largely able to separate what he does at work from his home life, though he is incredibly aware of what his children are doing online, and even more aware if he has had a particularly harrowing case that day.

Acting detective sergeant Danielle Power says she is also hyperaware of potential exploitation and admits the work is incredibly tough.

'Dan' says no one really knows why he and his colleagues can cope when others cannot. "I can compartmentalise it – but not everyone can," he says. "Why? I don't know. Why do some teachers go into primary and some go into secondary? My wife, a teaching assistant, says she could never go into a secondary. It's the same with this. Some people can handle murder cases, but one of my first jobs was a murder case and the particular scene I encountered still affects me. I still find it very difficult. But this – this I can handle."

RUSSELL SACH

Tes talks to… Lorin LaFave

Breck Bednar was murdered in 2014 by a man who groomed Breck online. Here, his mother tells **Will Hazell** why she believes schools have a crucial role in protecting young people from internet predators

Breck Bednar had a knack for figuring out how things worked right from when he was just a little boy.

"His favourite activities were building, making, putting things together," remembers his mother, Lorin LaFave. "He just had that sort of brain."

His precocious intelligence took him first to Lego and then, unsurprisingly, to technology and computers.

"It was just a really natural fit for him," says Lorin. "He was always learning how the computer worked and how to make it faster and more efficient."

He had already decided his career would either be in technology or that he would be a pilot – he had joined the Air Cadets to learn more about flying – when, in 2013, he came into contact with Lewis Daynes on an internet gaming platform.

Breck was groomed online by Daynes over a number of months. And then, in February 2014, aged just 14, he was lured to 18-year-old Daynes' flat in Essex where he was stabbed to death.

Lorin has relived her son's murder, and the events that led to it, many times over. First, because she had to, through the investigations, the trial, and the apologies of the police for not acting when she urged them to. But now, she does it because she feels she needs to.

She's a campaigner for internet safety at the Breck Foundation – a charity set up in his memory to help young people stay safe online. She wants teachers to help her keep other young people safe.

An American, Lorin moved to the UK with her husband, Barry, shortly before Breck was born. Though the couple later divorced, Breck was brought up in a loving family environment with his younger siblings, who are triplets.

Lorin was a teaching assistant at Breck's primary school. "I would observe him playing with the boys who had the same sorts of passions…this creative, clever group of boys who loved to build and make things," she recalls.

The Lego gang

Lorin nicknamed them the "Lego gang". After primary school, Breck fell temporarily out of touch with the boys because they went to different secondary schools. But, in Year 9, the Lego gang got back together through an online gaming group.

Lorin was relaxed about Breck spending time with his friends online: "I knew those boys…so I felt really confident that it was a nice place for him to play."

But because the boys used to talk to each other over the internet while they were gaming, and with Breck's room next to the kitchen, it wasn't long before Lorin overheard an unfamiliar voice. It sounded like a "deeper, man's voice".

"I went into Breck's room and said 'who are you online with?'" Breck pointed to a picture on his screen of a "really attractive, young boy" who looked like a "California prom king".

"Immediately I didn't feel that the voice fitted the picture," Lorin says.

Instead what came into her head was the image of a "40-year-old, fat paedophile sitting behind a computer in his underpants".

It's a trope we're all familiar with, but Lorin thinks this was one of her "first big mistakes".

"I and others have this stereotype that all predators are older men that look creepy,"

she explains. "A lot of the time, predators can be the children's own age, or slightly older, and then the child doesn't think they're a danger."

Daynes told the boys he was a teenage tech millionaire, and variously claimed to live in New York, London and elsewhere. He also said he was doing undercover work for the US government and the FBI.

Early concerns

Unsurprisingly, Lorin was sceptical. But when she voiced her early concerns with Breck, he would reply that his friends had been "gaming with this guy for years".

This is a message that schools need to communicate to their students, she says: "Just because a person is a friend of someone else you know and trust doesn't make that other person safe."

Lorin tried to find out more about Daynes, and, at first, he was engaging. "I could see why the boys looked up to him," she says. "He was well spoken…he would be able to converse with me in a way that an adult would."

He was also evasive, however. "I would try to ask him questions about living in New York; I would try to ask him about his work, but he would always sort of brush me off," she recalls.

Lorin first started to suspect that Daynes was exerting a malign influence on the boys when she noticed changes in Breck's personality.

"The reason I felt that Breck was being groomed right in the early days was because his ideology was changing," she says. Daynes tried to turn the boys against religion and the US and British governments.

Breck also became less responsive to his mother, and started objecting to simple chores around the house. His constant refrain was: "I shouldn't have to do this because Lewis says I shouldn't."

"I started becoming the bad guy, which is what will happen with a predator," Lorin explains. "They will turn the child against the parents, the family or any safe relationships."

It was at this stage that Lorin shared her concerns with teachers she knew. Though she could see something was wrong, she wasn't sure what Daynes' interest was in the boys – she thought it could either be sexual, about radicalisation, or maybe an attempt to get the boys to participate in some sort of "mass hack".

But none of the teachers she spoke to thought she should be worried. "The kind of advice I got was, 'Don't worry, all boys go through this phase.'

"I used the 'g' word – I said 'groomed', and nobody had advice for what to do."

The fact is that "Breck was not on anyone's radar". He was an intelligent, well-liked young man who didn't have "cuts or bruises", and wasn't "crying or being bullied openly".

Another of Lorin's key messages is that it doesn't matter whether a child appears obviously vulnerable or not; the groomed child "could be any sort of child".

Eventually, Lorin contacted Surrey Police. She couldn't have been clearer about her concerns: "I said I needed to speak to the department for grooming – once again, I used the 'g' word."

The call handler was unhelpful to say the least, says Lorin. "They said, 'Tell your son to go on a different website.' This was the most ridiculous advice on the planet because none of our children is on 'a' website. They're using social media, they're using different apps and messaging services."

Nevertheless, Lorin handed over all the information she'd managed to glean about Daynes, and she was assured three times that police intelligence would be checked. "I hung up the phone thinking I had it in hand," she says.

This was perhaps the biggest missed chance to save Breck's life – had the police done the check they would have seen that Daynes had been accused of raping a boy and possessing indecent images in 2011, though he wasn't charged. Surrey Police have since admitted making serious mistakes in how they handled the case, and have issued an unreserved apology.

Next, along with the parents of the other boys, Lorin organised an intervention meeting. They laid down a simple ultimatum: the parents would have to meet Daynes in person – "just a coffee, a chat" – otherwise the boys would have to break off their contact with him. The friends defended Daynes to the hilt and said that he would never agree to meet with the parents.

The parents then banned their children from making contact with him.

But unbeknown to Lorin, Daynes had instructed Breck to secretly record the meeting on an MP3 player. He knew the parents were on to him.

"Everything became that much more dangerous because it went underground," Lorin says. On the advice of the police, she had confiscated Breck's technology, but once again Daynes was one step ahead – he'd secretly couriered a brand new smartphone to Breck so they could continue to communicate.

The last time Lorin saw Breck alive was before he went away on a school trip to Spain. "We hugged and kissed and said goodbye to each other, and when he left, I was just so, so proud of him," she says.

A 'viral' murder

He had seemed back to his old self. But what Lorin didn't know was that while Breck was away, he was being "obsessed over and stalked" by Daynes, who was bombarding him with "non-stop text messages, voicemails, calls insisting that Breck get in touch". He claimed he had important news about his company and that only Breck could help.

When Breck returned from Spain, he went to stay with his dad. Daynes told Breck to give his dad a cover story that he was going over to his friend Tom's house. Daynes then sent Breck £100 for a taxi to drive an hour away, to his flat.

Breck was tied up with duct tape and murdered in a sadistic and sexually motivated attack. Horrifically, Daynes posted news of the death online, which went viral.

Breck's siblings received texts saying "so sorry to hear about your brother" before the family and police even knew what had happened. Daynes is now serving a life sentence for the murder.

"I decided to set up the foundation two weeks after Breck was killed," Lorin says. "I have to have something good come out of this horrible thing because I can't bear it otherwise."

The Breck Foundation's safety messages

Lorin LaFave has devised a simple way to remember how to stay safe online:

B – Be Aware, originally, but more recently, it has come to stand for "believe". "We have to get people to believe that there's dangers," says Lorin.

R – Report: "It's better to report something that ends up being harmless than to miss a report that could save someone's life."

E – Educate: "Everyone needs educating in these areas, but also 'empowerment'. We have to empower young people to help look after each other," explains Lorin.

C – Communicate – "It's so important we communicate these messages, we get young people to communicate with us, that we communicate with our children."

K – Keep safe: "Our ultimate goal".

www.breckfoundation.org

RUSSELL SACH

The Breck Foundation has the tagline "play virtual, live real", to remind young people that friends made online are not the same as their real friends.

Lorin says of one of the foundation's core messages is, "Never, ever meet up in a private place when you've met online."

The foundation has created simple safety messages with the letters of Breck's name (see box, below left). However, Lorin says schools also need to deliver online safety "in an engaging and interesting way – it can't be a list of rules".

She recalls that Breck himself had an e-safety assembly at school, but reported it to be "boring".

"If it's boring, they're just going to shut off," she says. "If I had to give one message [to teachers] it would be to be seek out the resources, videos and stories that are available, sit the children down in a different setting…and open up discussion in a really honest and engaged way.

"Let them talk. Let them talk about sex, about their fears, about what they've seen, what they've heard, without them being worried that they'll get in trouble, because it needs to be as real as possible. It cannot feel like a normal school lesson."

Schools also need to do more to increase awareness among parents, grandparents and other carers. To improve attendance at such meetings, she suggests schools hold family barbecues, or offer "movie nights" to keep children occupied while their parents are given information.

Lorin believes society is becoming more aware of online safety but she thinks "it's a never-ending battle".

"The problem is that technology moves so quickly, there are more predators finding new ways to reach children, and through new apps. It's a constantly evolving scenario."

And, of course, there's always a new generation of young people, teachers and police to educate: "Sadly we'll never get to a point where we can just tick it off and go 'we've fixed that problem'."

But in teachers, Lorin says children have one of their strongest allies.

"Thank goodness for teachers," she says. "Some people will say, 'Well, PSHE lessons should be taught at home.'"

But while "we can't rely on every parent to be knowledgeable in every area, we can train teachers to properly educate every child; that's the best way to reach as many young people as possible", Lorin says. "I have the greatest respect for teachers who devote their lives to ensuring that those young people they look after become the best selves that they can."

@whazell

ALAMY / GETTY

Are you scared of the dark?

Most teachers will have heard of it – and probably associate it with criminal activity – but, asks **Simon Creasey**, is the dark web really something that teachers need to worry about?

What do you know about the dark web? Most teachers will have at least heard of it. They've been told that it is a place to buy illegal items such as guns and drugs, as well as a means of accessing all kinds of nefarious banned imagery and information, from child pornography to terrorist training manuals.

But despite the fact that awareness of the phrase "dark web" is widespread, few teachers actually know what it is, how it operates or – most worryingly – how many of their students might be accessing it. So what do they need to know?

What is now known as the dark web was originally developed by US military researchers at the Naval Research Laboratory in the 1990s as a way of allowing intelligence operatives to communicate completely anonymously online. The software they created, called Tor – short for original project name, The Onion Router – was eventually released into the public domain.

Put in simple terms, the Tor web browser, which can be downloaded free of charge, allows people to anonymously access the normal web, where the likes of Google and Amazon reside, but it also acts as a portal to another online world. This shadier side of the web is a place that Rick Holland, vice-president of strategy at Dark Shadows, a company that monitors and manages organisations' digital risk, likens to "a bazaar for criminals" that can be accessed from the privacy of your own home.

The websites that operate on the dark web don't look like the sort of thing you might normally access online, according to Colin Tankard, managing director at cyber-security consultancy Digital Pathways.

"The experience isn't anything like Google," he says. "It's not easy to navigate and it's not brightly coloured. It's dark and dreary and full of command lines."

And these sites don't sell the kinds of things that you might find via Google. Criminal gangs have taken over the dark web to sell items such as drugs, guns and child pornography. And, thanks to the anonymity function built into Tor, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to trace users back to the computer they are using.

Tor versus Google

That probably sounds very scary and has you planning a PSHE lesson in your head already, but Joss Wright, a research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, would urge you to pause and read on. He feels that the dangers of the dark web have been exaggerated.

"It's probably had a disproportionate level of attention in comparison with its actual use or threats," he argues. "It's very niche, it's very small, and for every bit of illegal content on the dark web, most people would find it very much easier to find it on the normal web. It's much easier to do a Google search for 'terrorist training manuals' than it is to find this sort of material on the dark web."

Wright adds that there is little danger of children stumbling across the dark web accidentally because to access it you have to first download the Tor browser, then know the exact address of the website you want to access – on the dark web there is no search tool, such as Google, to help you navigate your way around.

He adds that even those who are using the Tor browser are largely not doing so for illegal purposes. "It's almost certain that the overwhelming majority of people who use Tor do not use it to access the dark web," says Wright. "Say, for example, that I wanted to do a Google search that was a little bit embarrassing. I might turn on Tor so that no one would know I was making that search."

Censorship or enlightenment?

That's not to say teachers should ignore the risks involved in accessing the dark web.

Kathryn Tremlett, a helpline practitioner at South West Grid for Learning, a not-for-profit charitable trust that was a founding member of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, says that in the first instance, teachers should familiarise themselves with Tor.

"It's important to know how it works, so having a play yourself is the best way for teachers to find out about it," she says.

After that, Wright advises having a "frank and open discussion" about the dark web rather than censoring or banning its use.

"The students who are most likely to use the dark web are the ones who already know all about it," says Wright. "As for the students who don't know about it, I really honestly think that if you tell them about it, they are unlikely to jump through the technical barriers to use it."

Tankard believes that another effective tactic is to employ the fear factor. "The dark web can be a bad place," he says. "So I don't think schools and education bodies should steer away from talking about it, but the approach should be more about the fear. The fear factor should be the trigger for people to say 'it might be interesting, but do I really want to go there?'"

In addition to educating staff about the risks, Holland thinks that schools should also run workshops for parents to make sure that they can reinforce the fear-factor message at home.

"Parents become very protective once they understand the risks," he says.

But ultimately, according to Wright, this should be secondary to making kids better equipped to deal with the normal web. Only then, he argues, should you tackle the "spectre" of the dark web.

Simon Creasey is a freelance journalist

ALAMY

We need to talk about pornography in schools

CHILDREN SHARING naughty images is nothing new. When I was in Year 7, I remember a boy in my school running around the playground brandishing page three of *The Sun* like a trophy. But times have changed.

Five years ago, when I was working at another school, I confiscated the phone of a Year 7 boy. The screensaver was an image of a naked woman in a dog collar fellating a man, who was grabbing her hair – and she looked in pain.

When I called home to speak to the boy's parents, his mum calmly explained that the boy's big brother had put the image on his phone – she'd seen it – and what was the problem?

The problem – personal politics aside – was that this image was totally inappropriate for an 11-year-old to see, let alone access on a regular basis. Bombarded with such images, many children are maturing into beliefs where this is not fantasy: it is expected.

Research commissioned by the NSPCC last year revealed that 53 per cent of boys and 39 per cent of girls who have viewed porn see it as a realistic depiction of sex.

There is not much that schools can do about the prevalence of online pornography or the ease with which it can be accessed by their students. Children are inquisitive and some know just about as much about how to get around school filters and firewalls as hackers do.

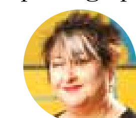
But I don't want these images in my school and I doubt I am alone. I am worried that the children accessing them are getting younger and especially concerned these images are normalising exploitative and abusive relationships.

Speaking to many heads and child protection leads, one of the biggest problems they have to deal with is now children requesting other children to recreate these images. Harassment and bullying of – particularly, but not exclusively – girls to take naked pictures or be videoed performing sexual acts to share with others.

A couple of assemblies a year and a poster in the tutor base is not enough. There has to be a continual dialogue: one involving families.

It has to start at a young age in primary schools. It has to be without the typical blushing English reserve and be discussed with children in a no-nonsense way. It has to be led from the top and someone on SLT and it has to be responsible.

It's not about making pornography bad – that hasn't done the drugs debate much good, after all – but it does have to be about developing a shared understanding of what is OK at what age and making it clear that having pornography in a school is never OK.



Keziah Featherstone is a co-founder and national leader for #WomenEd and a member of the Headteachers' Roundtable.

How pupils can help you fight online threats

Appointing 'pupil digital ambassadors' has given **Jack Talman**'s school the insider knowledge on the issues that young people face in cyberspace

Anyone who works with teenagers will know how important it is to them that they stay connected. Without their mobile phones, many will tell you that they feel lost, anxious and even fearful.

To those of us who can remember a time before social media, that level of attachment can seem excessive and a cause for concern. But for young people, this is simply their way of life. Clearly, there is now a chasm of experience that exists between us and those we teach, which makes it difficult to know how best to approach teaching them about staying safe online.

Yet there is actually an obvious solution to this: join forces with the people that we are trying to protect.

I have been head of PSHE at Hampton School, an all-boys' day school in West London, for seven years now. Online safety is under my remit, but, like many of my colleagues, I found that I was struggling to keep pace with all the latest developments in the technology pupils were using.

Then, two years ago, we brought in an agency to conduct an e-safety audit of the school. They encouraged us to engage pupils in e-safety and, as a result, we created a "pupil digital ambassador" programme.

We launched our digital ambassador programme with a special morning of workshops. Volunteers from every year group came forward, and the session started with the pupils discussing what they felt a digital ambassador's role should include. Together, we decided that the role should have two main objectives: to make sure that e-safety lessons stayed relevant and that the lessons were also engaging.

The boys split into smaller groups to discuss the different issues facing pupils of their age online. They then presented their thoughts and discussed how we could best address these issues. By the end of the morning, we had a plan to move forward with.

We arranged to hold a weekly meeting with the new digital ambassadors, a member of the senior management team and myself. It was important to demonstrate to the boys that there was engagement from those in leadership and that their views were valued. In the initial meetings, we continued to gather pupils' input on the issues they face and also began to put some of their solutions into action.

For example, we learned that younger pupils would benefit from more information on "stranger danger" and the risk that people online might not be who they claim to be. Our young ambassadors created a set of short films to help educate their classmates on this.

Sixth-form ambassadors, meanwhile, raised concerns about the impact that spending a lot of time online could have on mental health and the risk of replacing real relationships with virtual ones. As a result, we have adapted our PSHE programme to address these issues.

One theme that ran through our discussions with all of the year groups was the concern that some parents were not equipped to offer practical help. A phrase that I've heard used about the online world is that "it is like the Wild West without a sheriff". I think this is how our children sometimes view it: while the sense of freedom can feel exciting, it is also something that they are worried by. Our pupils expressed feelings of abandonment in what appears to be a lawless world, when they wanted to be able to turn to their parents for help.

In response to this, our first-year ambassadors helped to arrange an evening of e-safety education for their parents, while our third-year ambassadors made a video in which they asked their parents for guidance and support with social media. In order for parents to learn on their own, we've also set up an online education programme with the support of the social enterprise Parentzone.

One of the challenges, however, has been keeping the initiative going. These initial interventions have been very successful and our e-safety approach is now much better, but once their initial ideas had been brought to fruition, there was a feeling among a few of the ambassadors that their job was done.

This year, I would like to give them more of a presence in school by having them deliver an assembly to their peers. I am also hoping to take them out of school on a trip to a tech company headquarters in order to keep them excited about and committed to the valuable role that they play.

By working in partnership with students, we can give them the tools to safely make the most of the amazing digital world.

PAUL BATEMAN

Pupil power

Useful suggestions from Hampton's pupil digital ambassadors

- **Year 7: Parent information evenings**
  Our pupils said they wanted their parents to be better equipped to help them with online issues. We arranged a series of parent information evenings, and sharing information on e-safety is now a regular part of our parental engagement.
- **Year 9: Pupil-made e-safety films**
  Pupils felt that certain e-safety messages may have a stronger impact if they came from their peers and worked on producing a series of videos to share with their year group.
- **Year 12: Online living and mental health**
  Our sixth-formers were concerned about how our "online" way of living can sometimes affect mental health and wanted to explore this topic within the PSHE curriculum, so new lessons were created that do this.

Jack Talman is head of PSHE at Hampton School in London

The student who transformed tech into a way to beat the cyberbullies

Trisha Prabhu, the inventor of an app that detects offensive messages and prompts young people to think twice before posting them, on why she needs teachers to help her push her message further

It was a 12-year-old girl called Rebecca who first made me realise that cyberbullying was a serious problem. I was 13 when I read her story online, and she spurred me into action to do something about it.

Rebecca had been cyberbullied for a year and a half after getting into a feud with two other young women about a boy. On her walk to school one day, she decided she couldn't take it anymore. She ended up climbing to the top of her town's water tower and jumping off.

I've told that story so many times, but it never becomes easier. It's unacceptable and heart-breaking. When I first read it, I was stunned. How could a girl younger than me be pushed to take her own life? I was cyberbullied growing up – for my unbecoming wardrobe and frizzy hair – but I didn't realise this issue affected teenagers in a way that could be fatal.

It made me wonder why young people were doing this to each other. As a teen, I was curious as to why we would choose to make poor decisions that would harm others. I know that teens aren't bad people, but I think that sometimes we have lapses of judgement where we don't realise the significance of what we're doing. I wanted to find out if there was a reason for this. So, I started to research the adolescent brain.

It wasn't long before I came across this very interesting piece of research that likened teenagers' pre-frontal cortex – the part of the brain that has been implicated in things like decision-making and moderating social behaviour – to a car without brakes.

Because the pre-frontal cortex is not yet fully developed, teens really struggle to make rational decisions and to go through the full decision-making process. In the heat of the moment, especially when emotions are involved, they make choices they later regret.

I wondered if there was a way to tap into this and to make kids think about what they were doing. That's really where the idea for ReThink was born.

Giving teenagers a second chance

ReThink is a free app that I have developed that forces young people to reconsider before they post offensive messages on social media platforms. I conducted a study that looked at how teenagers who had the opportunity to rethink responded when they were about to post something offensive like "you are so ugly", relative to teenagers who didn't have that opportunity. What I found, after about nine months of study, was that when a teenager got a second chance to think about an offensive message they were about to post, more than 93 per cent of the time they decided not to post it. The overall willingness to post an offensive message dropped from 71.1 per cent to 4.7 per cent.

Of course, not all teenagers will have an app like this enabled on their device to make sure that they take the time to stop and think. This is why advocacy and education around cyberbullying is also crucial.

The role that teachers have to play is twofold. First, teachers need to make sure they are directly communicating the anti-cyberbullying message and focusing on the "cyber" aspect. Until recently, the primary focus has always been on bullying in general, but cyberbullying is different – because it can be insidious in nature.

A lot of teachers might have memories from school of a kid being bullied on the playground; when that kid went home, the bullying was finished and that's where it ended. But that's just not the world we live in today.

Teachers need to be constantly sending the message that you are what you say and if you want to be someone that you're proud of then you should be saying things that you're proud of. At the end of the day, teachers are big role models for teenagers such as me and when a teacher is constantly promoting a message like that, it does seep in.

Secondly, I think it's really important for teachers to encourage their kids to be advocates. Part of the reason I'm here is that I had an amazing set of teachers and mentors to support me in my work. They told me: "You're not too young: there's no barrier that stops you doing what you want to do. You go for it and we're going to have your back." It's really important to know that you have that support.

I would encourage teachers to tell kids to be fearless, to be brave. "Failure" is a scary word for a lot of kids because it is ingrained in us from a very young age that we must be perfect and be good at everything.

But if teachers can instead create a culture where students are not afraid to raise their hand, even when they are not sure of the answer, we will have a generation of young people who have the courage to think about how their words affect people and who will be more likely to reconsider before they post.

ALAMY

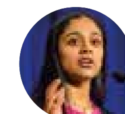
ReThink: How does it work?

The ReThink technology picks up on certain key words that we would argue are offensive no matter what context you're using them in. But language can be more complicated than that. For example, if you wanted to post something on social media like, "I hate this weather", well that's not really the same as "I hate you". So, we use context-sensitive filtering and machine learning. We have complex algorithms that work to determine the sentiment of each message. Because it is a self-learning type of technology, it gets more accurate every time someone uses it.

Of course, this is a process that is never-ending. We're constantly working to improve and are starting to develop international versions of the app. We're hoping to release ReThink in Spanish and Hindi in the next month and this will be a stepping stone to even more languages: British English, French, German, Italian, you name the country, we want to go there. Hopefully, in the future we want to work on image-based cyberbullying, too.

ReThink has received several awards, such as Google Science Fair (Global Finalist), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Aristotle Award, Illinois Innovation Award, Health Hero Award and International Diana Award. It is funded through prize money from these awards and through donations.

Find out more: www.rethinkwords.com



Trisha Prabhu attends Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, Illinois. The ReThink app is available for free in the Google Play Store and the Apple App Store

GETTY

Weighing up the ethics of watching pornography

Teaching students to be safe online starts not with prohibition or didactic moralising, but by exploring the philosophical issues in a language and context that young people can understand, believes **Christian Pountain**

"Just what exactly is wrong with internet pornography, sir?"

Steve*, an articulate Year 11 boy, asked me this question during a recent RE lesson. It was asked with a straight face, respectfully, and as far as I could tell, with integrity and conviction.

He continued: "It's a free country, and what one teenage boy gets up to in the privacy of his own bedroom is nobody else's business. In any case, watching consensual sex between adults actually serves society because it's a way for people to deal with their frustrations, instead of them finding expression in sexual assault or rape."

How would you answer this question? We'll come to that later, but for now the question simply serves to underline the fact that none of us are teaching in a moral vacuum – a fact that presents challenges when teaching about online safety.

The world of social media and the internet that our pupils inhabit has created a new set of norms and values around how we act towards one another. For this reason, providing a list of prohibitions for what not to do online will never be enough to keep pupils safe.

If we want to truly protect our young people, we have to instead start further upstream and help them to see the bigger picture of what it means to be human. Here's how to do that.

Start with the basics: human rights

The UN's universal declaration of human rights is a good place to start for how we should treat one another online. The first article is especially relevant: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

At my school, we recently ran a series of assemblies on selected articles. Pupils seemed to respond well; there are worse ways of filling 30 weeks' worth of assemblies.

Revisit the rules of societies

Whether you are drawing from the moral codes embedded in Classical philosophy, works of literature such as myths and fables, or the teachings of the world's great religions, you will find certain ideas about how we should behave towards one another that emerge time and again. These are the key themes that we want to be revisiting – and examining – with our pupils.

For example, what is it about the Golden Rule (treat other people as you would like to be treated), that has preserved it for millennia?

Within the context of discussing these big ideas, we can address questions of identity, equality, liberty and justice, as well as exploring the innate human dignity that exists at the core of our being, which can so easily be eroded and undermined by the dangers we face online.

Examine the ethics

Whether we are warning pupils about online grooming, trying to get them to understand what constitutes true friendship (hint: it takes more than just clicking 'follow'), or helping them to recognise the implications of sexting, it is never enough to merely state "don't do it". Pupils need to know why.

In the spirit of knowledge-based education, when it comes to answering questions like Steve's, perhaps the best approach is to provide some old-fashioned knowledge about what online pornography can be.

Over the years, I have found the analogy "porn is like a doner kebab" quite helpful in getting students like Steve to understand what exactly is so wrong with porn. In the shop window, the kebab looks good; it might even taste nice while you consume it. But it's not good for us, and more than that, if we knew what often went into making it, we might have a very different outlook on eating it.

Take the fact that conservative estimates place the number of slaves in the world today at about 27 million, and that most are women and children who have been trafficked into the sex trade; victims are raped, tortured and abused, all for the sake of the "teenage boy in his free country, doing no harm, exercising his right to watch porn".

I shared this information, taken from thenakedtruthproject.com, with Steve and by the end of the lesson, he voluntarily announced, "I'm never going to use porn again." Whether or not he followed through on his promise is not the main issue. He had begun to view what he saw online as more than victimless content, and this alone is a step in the right direction.

***Not his real name**

Christian Pountain is head of RE and director of spirituality at a secondary school in Lancashire

Megan Pengelly

GETTY

A teachers' crash course on the risks of online gambling

SOME 450,000 people aged 11-15 gamble each week, according to a recent report by the Gambling Commission. To put this in context, this is more than the number who have an alcoholic drink or smoke a cigarette.

As online gambling becomes more prevalent, the need for education about the difference between responsible and problem gambling is becoming apparent.

The minimum legal age for most types of gambling in the UK is 18. Exceptions are the National Lottery and scratch cards (16 or older), and certain types of arcade game, such as penny slots.

Problem gambling can have a profound effect on a person's life, contributing to financial, social or mental health issues. It often disproportionately affects already at-risk groups, including those with low emotional states and those already engaging in risky behaviour, such as truanting or drug use.

Online gambling can be particularly difficult for schools to monitor. New forms of gambling such as e-sports betting (placing bets on professionals playing computer games in front of live audiences) and skins betting (using roulette-style games on third-party sites to bet on the real-world value of in-game bonuses such as 'skins' for weapons and avatars) are increasingly popular.

And whereas a young person regularly frequenting a bookmaker might be easy to spot, the amount of time they spend gambling online is hard to track.

However, there are ways to have a positive effect on young people's gambling behaviour. At a whole-school level, filtering software that blocks access to sites with gambling functions, can be effectively implemented.

Meanwhile, charities such as GamCare provide online resources aimed at young people: bigdeal.org.uk hosts a range of quizzes and videos that can be used in lessons or assemblies.

The site provides blogs and interactive features aimed at raising awareness of responsible gambling and opportunities for support. Young people can also read and share real stories of problematic gambling, or contact GamCare's NetLine support service.

Online services such as these can complement, but not replace, supportive conversations with teachers or other responsible adults.

To make sure staff at school feel comfortable having these types of conversations, enlist an external training provider to coach your team on how to screen for problems and where to refer young people for further information and support. GamCare offers this training free of charge.

Ultimately, online problem gambling is a safeguarding issue and teachers must treat it as such.

Megan Pengelly is youth outreach coordinator at GamCare. For more information, go to bit.ly/EduGC