

Promoting Internet Safety Through Public Awareness Campaigns

Guidance for Using Real Life Examples Involving Children or Young People

Issued by the Home Office Taskforce for Child Protection on the Internet

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Home Office Taskforce on Child Protection on the Internet

1. The Home Office Taskforce on Child Protection on the Internet was established in March 2001 in response to concerns about the possible risks to children after a number of serious cases where children had been “groomed” via the internet.
2. The Taskforce brought together representatives from the internet industry, children’s charities, the main opposition parties, government departments, law enforcement, academics and others who share the aim of making the United Kingdom the best and safest place in the world for children to use the internet. This partnership approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility that underpins the work of the Taskforce and an acknowledgement that each of the groups represented has a role to play.

How this guidance note was produced

3. In February 2005 the Taskforce decided that a small group of child protection experts should be convened in order to draw up guidance on using real life examples when developing educational and awareness materials in order to promote internet safety through public campaigns
4. A working group was established which drew on the experience of a number of leading child protection professionals from NCH, Stop it Now!, NSPCC, the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS), National Crime Squad, the Children’s Society, LSE, Warwick University, the University of Westminster and the Home Office.

BACKGROUND

Purpose of the guidance note

5. This guidance will be relevant for and is intended to help or advise anyone considering developing materials for any kind of public awareness or marketing campaign intended to promote the safety of children and young people¹ on the internet, mobile phones or other interactive communications technologies (ICT). It may also be relevant to anyone developing other campaigns involving or aimed at children.
6. The guidelines set out a number of factors which need to be taken into account by anyone thinking about using, as part of their public awareness or marketing campaign, any factual information which has been taken from real life cases where a child or young person has been sexually, physically or psychologically abused following an initial encounter which was facilitated by an ICT.
7. Equally, the guidelines will be of interest to anyone who might be asked to provide materials or information for such awareness or marketing activity where those materials or that information have been drawn from real life cases for which they have, or had, a managerial or professional responsibility.
8. The guidelines are informed by and are consistent with embedded UK child protection legal frameworks and established principles and knowledge of best practice in the child welfare sector.

Primary audience for the document

9. These guidelines are intended primarily for use by police officers, social workers, counsellors and other professionals working with children who have been abused. They may also be of interest to teachers or to anyone concerned with marketing or promoting safety messages about ICTs, whether within a media organization or a commercial or a not-for-profit environment.

¹ Wherever a reference is made to “children and young people” it refers to persons under the age of 18.

GUIDANCE

Influencing behaviour

10. Influencing someone else's behaviour is rarely an easy task. An approach which is too understated, anodyne or uninteresting risks missing the target. Resorting to exaggerated or extreme representations is also unlikely to be convincing. Appeals or advice which are largely theoretical or are simply exhortatory will often fall on stony ground. On the other hand, as part of a wider programme which is designed to influence a child or young person's behaviour, using examples, case studies or illustrations which are grounded in real life, in real cases, can be a powerful method of communication. It allows people to make a direct connection.
11. The challenge in seeking to influence the behaviour of children and young people about the potential dangers linked to the use of ICT, is therefore to present them with relevant information which conveys the underlying safety messages in ways that are recognisably realistic.
12. In relation to child safety issues and preventative education more generally, it is well established that promoting safety through one off events, however immediately engaging they may appear to be, is unlikely to be effective in the longer run. Thus, any approach in a school setting needs to be sustained and well integrated within the curriculum. It is also important that schools, or indeed any other agencies that may involve themselves in this type of work, have in place appropriate processes and resources to respond appropriately in the event that a child or young person who has been exposed to the materials discloses an experience of sexual or other form of abuse.

The preservation of anonymity is of paramount importance

13. To achieve realism it is not always necessary to focus exclusively on the facts of a single or specific case. Amalgamating the facts from several different cases, to present a composite case or a composite series of cases, can be just as effective.
14. The very substantial advantage of using composite cases is that it can help to preserve the anonymity of any individual whose experience has contributed to the example being used. Preserving the anonymity of any and all children or young people whose cases have contributed to the publicly available materials has to be regarded as being of paramount importance. In a number of circumstances this will also be a strict legal requirement.
15. No child's or young person's circumstances should be used in a way which would allow them or their carers to be identified. It should be made very clear when the material is presented that, while the information presented is based

entirely on real things that have happened to real people, it is not in any way based solely on the facts of any given individual's case and that it is, in fact, a composite.

16. That still leaves open the possibility that the invented case could still closely match an individual's case. This is an inevitable consequence of drawing on real life cases at all. To help guard against it as far as one can, it may be particularly important never to use geographically specific information.
17. Where the police or other agencies involved in making the materials or using them know of the possibility that a composite case might resemble a real life case in their area or elsewhere, they should consider contacting the individuals concerned to inform them and to reassure them that the materials do not jeopardise their anonymity in any way whatsoever.
18. So long as all reasonable steps are taken to ensure that as far as possible all parties' anonymity has been preserved, from an ethical point of view, the benefit to be derived from the public campaign will normally be sufficient to allow the project to proceed.

“Telling a story” is not the same as publicising it

19. Where a child has been sexually, physically or psychologically abused, very often they have an entirely understandable sense of outrage and anger which is rooted in the trauma or humiliation they have suffered. Such emotions are similar to those experienced by young people who have been sexually, physically or psychologically abused where the new technologies played no role at all – they are predominantly feelings of fear, shame, misplaced responsibility or complicity, humiliation, anger, and powerlessness. However, when the abuse involves one of the new technologies, in addition young people often hold a particular fear of their peer group discovering that they “got conned” by a virtual “friend” and that their carers or parents will find out about their activities online, in particular regarding the uninhibited sexual language they may have used.
20. Part of the recovery process for some young people will involve them talking about what happened to them and sharing that with a trusted adult. Some young people might also find some kind of resolution to their abuse through using their experience to prevent others from getting into the same predicament and may wish to become involved in the production of awareness raising and prevention programmes. In such circumstances it may be the young person who suggests such a course of action or it may be a professional known to them. Either way, before such an initiative occurs the young person needs to be in a position where he/she has recovered from his/her trauma and is thus better equipped to make more objective decisions.

21. It also needs to be borne in mind that while a willingness to “tell a story” publicly may be clear and explicit at the point in time when consent is first given, the materials then created may ‘live’ for many years, and be reproduced and circulated in several different ways as time goes by, in ways that the individual would not have consented to had they known about them at the time, or as their life circumstances change. With the use of IT equipment and the internet, material created for a select audience and a specific time can become available worldwide and live on, effectively, for ever.
22. The sexual abuse of a child or young person can have long lasting consequences, some of which may not become apparent for a substantial period of time and may require very long term care, support or therapy.
23. Every single case demands an individual assessment. In making an assessment there needs to be an informed understanding of the young person’s state of recovery, their wishes and feelings, their motivation for wanting to be involved and their ability to give informed consent . No young person’s experience should be used if they are not of an age and understanding, and have the mental capacity, to give informed consent. In particular, care needs to be taken that the vulnerability of a young person is not taken advantage of or manipulated in ways which, in the longer term, might compromise the young person’s prospects of making the fullest possible recovery. The best interests of the young person needs to be paramount in the minds of all the professionals involved
24. When a young person has given consent for their experience to be used in any form of awareness raising activity, it is important that they have recourse to a named practitioner for future support should they require it. The need to provide longer-term close support for a child or young person may become particularly acute if, for example, the abuse which the child or young person suffered was, in addition or as part of the abuse, made the subject of a still or moving image which has been posted on the internet or distributed in some other way e.g. via a mobile phone. There have been a number of studies that have looked at both the short and long term impacts of the sexual abuse of a child or young person being recorded as an indecent image². The child or young person may be aware that, for the foreseeable future, for practical purposes it is probably impossible to recover all of these images and they will therefore never know with complete certainty who has already seen them, or who might see them either shortly or at some time in their future. This is likely to be very corrosive of a child’s or young person’s self-confidence or self-esteem and further complicate the process of recovery.
25. Depending on the professional code they work to, the police officer, social workers or counsellor who has been working with a child or young person may need first to obtain their express permission even to mention their case to any

² Silbert, 1989, Svedin and Back 1996, and Scott 2001

third parties, but that is as far as it should ever go. Equally, whoever does then approach the child or young person should not say or do anything to imply that to give their agreement to the proposal would in some way be repaying the kindness which has been shown to them by their colleague. The child or young person should not feel in any way coerced or pressured into making a particular decision.

26. In that light, it is particularly important to ensure if, for example, any individual police officers, social workers or counsellors have formed a close relationship with a child or young person in the course of investigating a crime or in the course of providing treatment or support, they are not the same ones who approach the child to ask for their permission to use the facts of their case in any wider promotional campaigns.
27. It would also be important to ensure that, in any promotional materials which appear in the public domain, any police officers, social workers or counsellors who might have had any face-to-face contact with the child or young person e.g. by visiting them at home or at school, are not identifiable from the materials for fear that someone else viewing the material would recognise them as being the person whom they had seen with the person they now will realise or assume was a victim of sexual abuse.

Informed consent

28. It is axiomatic that where a proposal involves using facts drawn only from an individual's case, the proposal cannot, or at any rate ought not to proceed without the individual's consent. Equally, it is also important to ensure that any decision a child or young person might be called upon to make is based on full knowledge of the consequences. It must be based on informed consent. Consideration should therefore be given to providing the child or young person concerned with independent advice or counselling prior to them being asked to make the decision.
29. It may be very difficult to obtain informed consent in the near aftermath of a traumatic experience or some other major emotional experience e.g. following giving evidence in court, following a trial or sentencing. Time and distance lend perspective. They also allow the emotion or trauma to subside and thereby facilitate a more reasoned decision.
30. Parental or carers' consent will also normally be required before the facts of a child's case can be used. The child's or young person's parents or carers may be required to act as the child's agent in these matters. Prior to asking for the parents' or carers' consent it would also be important to ensure they, the parents, also fully understood all the implications of what it is they are being asked to agree. The parents also must give informed consent. Such advice might best be provided to the parents or carer by an independent third party.

31. It is also important to bear in mind the duty of care that any organisation has when engaging a model or actor to represent a young person. Informed consent needs to be obtained from them and, if they are a minor, from their legal guardian. Due regard needs to be given to the issue of the impact on any model or actor who is representing the victim for the purpose of the scenario. This is important as the model or actor may be recognised and may actually be mistaken for the actual victim no matter how many times the resource indicates that the “part is played by an actor”. The actors and their parents need to be involved before, during and after the production and informed consent must be sought. It is also essential to offer a debriefing to any actor who has played the role of a child abuse victim and to offer any counselling for issues that the part they played may have raised.

The views of parents, carers and any involved professionals should normally be obtained before an approach is made to the child or young person

32. Reaching a decision on whether to use a child’s experience in a campaign is a complex process. The decision needs to be reached in a way that minimises the risk that the child or their carers are not unwittingly pressured into it. While a strong bond will develop between the counsellor and the child and the child may raise the issue themselves, the counsellor’s role must be to refer the issue of publicity to others (subject to the child’s approval to discuss it with others) and to continue to focus on the interests of that child. If there are doubts or objections on the part of the child’s carers, it will not be appropriate to proceed.
33. It would rarely be desirable for an approach to be made directly to a child or young person to discuss the possibility of the facts of their case being used in a public way, without the person wanting to make the approach first raising it with the child’s parents or carers and also having discussed it with any social worker or counsellor who may be working with the child at that time, or who may have worked with the child recently, whether in relation to the specific incident in hand or possibly in relation to other issues.
34. In practice it is most likely to be the professionals who know the young person well who will be part of the initial discussions regarding the development of awareness raising and prevention materials. The young person may make the initial approach or it might be a concept first developed by the professional(s) involved with the young person. In either scenario, once the idea has been mooted there needs to be a clear understanding on the part of the professional(s) that they inform the young person that the matter is not a “fait accompli” and that there will need to be discussions between significant people in their lives, including parents/carers.
35. Once discussions, in which the young person should be included, have been held, the rationale for taking the matter forward, or not, needs to be clearly explained and understood by all parties. If any one or more of the parties

involved, but particularly the parents or carers, express serious doubts or opposition to the child being approached to be asked for their consent, then that ought to be conclusive and the matter should not be taken any further. Obtaining the active support of the parents for the proposal, not their mere acquiescence, must be the primary objective.

36. The importance of this last point, and in particular the position of the parents, carers and any professionals who may have worked with the child or young person, cannot be over emphasised. To approach the child or young person first, before having taken an informed view from and winning the support of all the relevant parties, risks creating great tensions. To approach the child or young person first risks presenting the issue to the parents, carers or professionals as a *fait accompli*, thus effectively depriving the parents, carers or professionals of the opportunity of expressing their true feelings on the subject, or at any rate it risks limiting what they feel they can say. It risks a direct clash.
37. Assuming no doubts or opposition are expressed by the parents, carers or professionals, it would still be important to ensure that the child or young person does not in any way feel pressured into making any particular decision. The fact that these other people agree with the idea should not be used as a point of pressure to persuade the child or young person to give their consent.

The legal position of the child

38. Up until now this note has suggested that if there is any disagreement among the parents, carers or professionals about whether the facts of a child's or young person's case should be used in promotional materials, then the matter ought not be pursued with, or put to, the child or young person and the proposal should therefore be dropped. However, this should not be taken to imply that the child or young person does not have any independent rights of their own. They most certainly do. Assuming the child or young person is competent to give consent³, they may well have the legal capacity to disagree with their parents, carers or professionals and for their view to prevail. But it must nonetheless still be open to doubt whether or not the child's or young person's best interests will truly be served if the project proceeds in the face of such stated opposition or in such circumstances. This will need to be assessed case by case.
39. This note only addresses the position of children or young people under the age of 18. By definition, therefore, they have a limited legal capacity to enter into different kinds of agreements. To the extent that such considerations are relevant it is therefore likely to be legally necessary to engage with the child's or young person's parents or carers who may be required to give their consent, or be required not to withhold such consent unreasonably.

³ Generally known as *Gillick* competent

40. In so far as the child's or young person's consent was originally required, the child's or young person's legal rights to withdraw or alter their consent later on also needs to be fully explained. As a child or young person matures so their capacity to alter decisions taken previously may also change. Once again the child or young person may have legal rights which are separate from and independent of their parents or carers, and they may therefore have or acquire the power to override or amend any agreements their parents or carers may have made on their behalf.

Other legal considerations

41. The timing of a public awareness campaign may be important. If facts from a particular case are to be used, it would almost always be essential that nothing is said or done in the public domain until the trial is over. Similarly, if other unrelated but similar cases are known to be pending, no one will want to jeopardise anyone's right to receive a fair trial by mounting a high profile public campaign immediately before or during the trial.
42. It will also be important to establish if, in a given case, the court had made any orders in relation to publicity, or about the position of the child. If the child is a ward of court or is subject to a local authority care order other factors will also need to be considered.

The role of the school and other agencies using promotional material

43. In paragraph 12 (above) a number of important references have been made about the way in which promotional materials ought to be used within a school or similar setting.
44. In addition, where facts about a child's or young person's case have been used within a promotional campaign, and if the child or young person is still at school, consideration may also need to be given as to whether or not, and if so how, relevant people at the school or other agency are informed. This needs to be considered against the possibility that there will be some potential for other children or young people at the school to find out what has happened to the individual and this could lead to bullying or other forms of harassment.
45. If any of the statutory authorities or other agencies decides to bring in or involve partners to help them produce the promotional materials e.g. film companies or design agencies, it would be very important to ensure that these partners fully understand the sensitive nature of the work and to ensure they are professionally competent to undertake work in this area.

Summary/ Check List

- The challenge is to present children and young people with relevant information and seek to convey underlying safety measures in ways which are realistic.
- To achieve realism it is not always necessary to focus exclusively on a specific case; a composite case or a composite series of cases can be just as effective.
- Composite cases can help to preserve anonymity, which has to be of paramount importance.
- When a real scenario is presented to young people its impact is forceful.
- A young person's desire to prevent other young people from going through the same abusive experience that they have endured may be part of their recovery process.
- Every case demands an individual assessment.
- The young person should receive appropriate close support and have a named independent person with whom they can talk regarding the issues of allowing their personal experience to be used in a case study. The child or young person must be in a position to give informed consent.
- Strategies need to be adopted that will minimise the risk of the child's or young person's emotional turmoil being exploited.
- It is important to ensure that there are no identifying features in the material which would expose the young person whose personal experience is used as a case study, and also to ensure that any of the professionals involved in the case cannot be easily identified from the materials produced.
- Parental consent will normally be required before the facts of a child's or young person's case can be used. Those holding parental consent may also need assistance in giving informed consent and should be offered the opportunity of receiving advice from an independent third party.
- It is important to be aware that the promotional materials created may live on for many years.

Contact details

If you have any comments or queries about this guidance please contact:

Jon Williams

Home Office

2 Marsham Street

London SW1P 4DF

E mail: Jon.Williams37@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk