

Equipping Young People to Navigate Post-digital Sexual Violence

AHRC Follow on Funding for Impact and Engagement Project School Based Digital Defence and Activism Lessons



Report Key Contact:

Professor Jessica Ringrose, University College London, j.ringrose@ucl.ac.uk

Report Credits:

Professor Jessica Ringrose, University College London

Dr. Kaitlynn Mendes, Western University, Canada

Dr. Karen Desborough, University of Leicester

Workshop Design:

School of Sexuality Education

Dr. Karen Desborough, University of Leicester

Dr. Kaitlynn Mendes, Western University Canada

Professor Jessica Ringrose, University College London

Professor Tanya Horeck, Anglia Ruskin University

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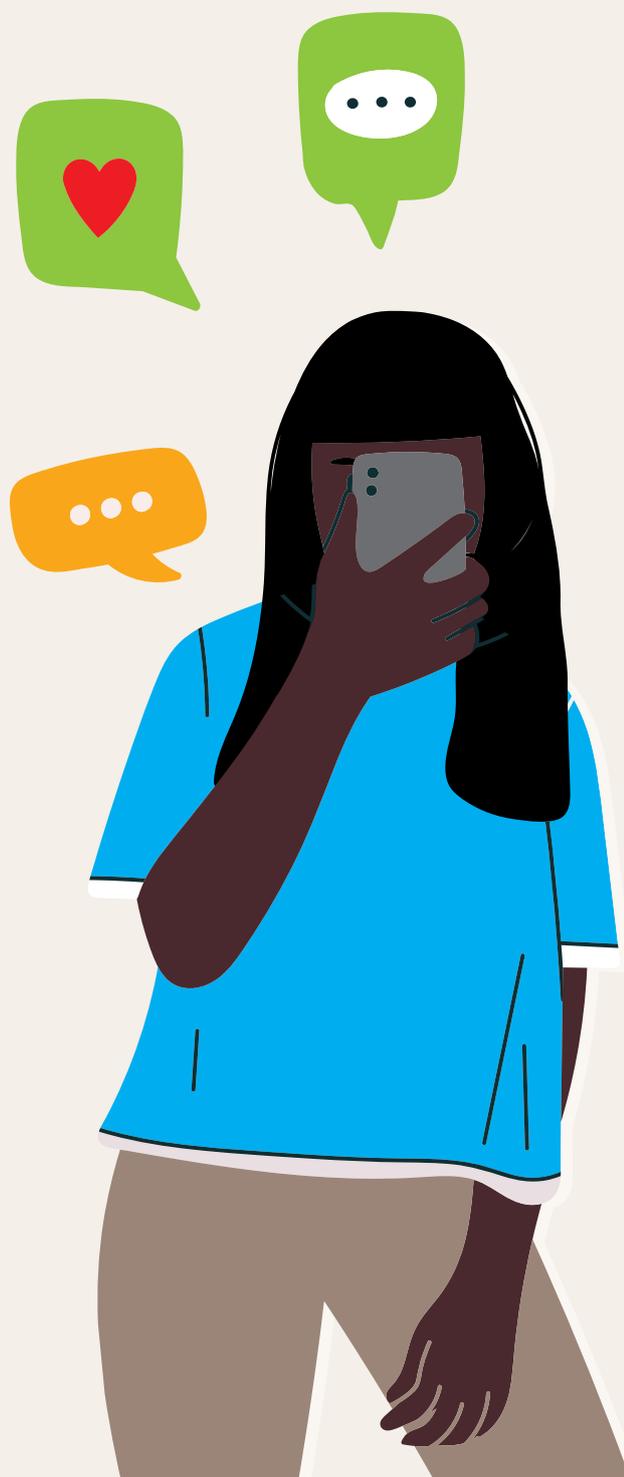
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Executive Summary

Through co-producing school-based workshops, this project had two key aims: 1) educate students about sexual and gender-based violence in a post-digital context, and 2) equip them with digital defence strategies to stay safe online and practices enabling effective activism to challenge sexual violence.

Two workshops were co-produced with project partner the School of Sexuality Education (SSE) with input from Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL): [Workshop 1: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence](#) and [Workshop 2: Activating for Change](#) (Bystander Intervention)

Both use creative and participatory pedagogies, including a video, scenarios, post it activities and art activism, and include interactive activities to enhance student engagement and learning. The workshops also respond to key aspects of the Department for education statutory guidance [Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) \(Secondary\)](#) specifically in relation to sections about ‘respectful relationships’, ‘online and media’ and ‘intimate and sexual relationships’

We also created supplementary training workshops and [explanation notes for teachers](#) which are aligned with the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum.

Alongside SSE, we also co-developed a [workshop for teachers](#), training them how to deliver the student workshops. These one to two-hour sessions were delivered in various formats including: school staff meetings which all teachers attended; PGCE and School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) programs at the University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Derby University, and University College London; webinar training; and through sessions delivered at various national conferences such as the [Association of School and College Leaders](#) annual conference, the annual [National Association for Pastoral Care](#) conference, and the [Sex Education Forum](#).

The student workshops were piloted with entire year groups of between 150 and 200 young people, either Year 9 (aged 13-14) or Year 10 (aged 14-15), typically in classrooms of about 20-30 students at a time. We observed 53 of these workshops delivered by SSE facilitators to approximately 988 young people in eight diverse schools across England. Students and teachers rated our workshops as highly effective:

- 55% of young people had never learned about the issue of sexual violence in school prior to the workshops.
- 88.6% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that Workshop 1 improved their knowledge of sexual violence and the different forms it takes.

- 97% of young people agreed Workshop 2 improved their understandings of how to be an active bystander in situations of sexual violence.
- 95% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the training workshop had improved their knowledge of what sexual violence is and the different forms it takes.

Workshop pre and post survey and focus groups findings showed a positive impact on students’ learning including an enhanced understanding of sexual violence, its different forms, and how it can be technology facilitated. The Department for Education’s relationships and sex education guidance states the all secondary pupils should understand rights, responsibilities and opportunities online – these workshops offered participants a chance to engage and think critically about each of those in the context of sexual violence and harassment.

The workshops also increased awareness of activism and how to be an active bystander, including in digital contexts. This learning equipped students with concrete strategies for challenging sexual violence in a post-digital society. Most students liked the fact that the workshops were based on relatable scenarios, used videos, had real language like ‘dick pics’, and used engagement techniques like post-it notes and drawing, combined with break-out discussion groups. This format was a welcome alternative to one-way lectures in which they were simply told what not to do.

In addition to these positive responses to the workshop’s format, they emphasised feeling empowered by learning definitions, laws and rights. This aligns with the Department for Education’s RSE guidance which emphasises the importance of understanding what the law says about sex, relationships and young people.

Since completing our project, we piloted these workshops in two schools in Ireland and one school in Canada. In total, these workshops and resources have reached approximately 2700 students in 18 schools and more than 1750 teachers across hundreds of school sites across England, Australia, Ireland, Canada, and Europe. These were delivered through monthly webinars and various presentations at subject associations. Since completing the study, we have partnered with the UK Charity [Life Lessons](#), and we continue to explore ways to scale up our workshop and teacher training.

Focus Group Data

Name/Location	School Type	Focus Group	Year	Participants	Gender
School 1 (Norfolk)	Mixed state secondary	14	9	3	Girls
		15	9	5	Mixed
		16	9	6	Mixed
		17	9	6	Mixed
School 2 (Cornwall)	Mixed state secondary	3	9	3	Girls
		4	9	2	Mixed
		5	10	10	Girls
School 3 (Hampshire)	Mixed state secondary	10	9	6	Mixed
		11	9	4	Girls
		12	9	5	Girls
		13	11&12	8	Mixed
School 4 (North London)	Single-sex, 'all boys' state secondary	6	10	11	Boys
		7	10	10	Boys
		8	10	10	Boys
		9	10	7	Boys
School 5 (Surrey)	Mixed state academy	1	10	10	Mixed
		2	10	10	Mixed
School 6 (South East London)	Mixed State Academy	18	10	6	Mixed
		19	10	6	Mixed
		20	10	6	Mixed
		21	10	6	Mixed
School 7 (South East London)	Mixed state secondary	22	10	5	Mixed
		23	10	5	Mixed
		24	10	6	Mixed
Total				147	

Workshop Data

Name/Location	School Type	Workshop Type*	Workshop # given	Year	Participants
School 1 (Norfolk)	Mixed state secondary	1	8	9	232
		2	8	9	232
School 2 (Cornwall)	Mixed state secondary	1	4	9	112
		2	4	9	112
School 3 (Hampshire)	Mixed state secondary	1	4	9	146
		2	4	9	146
School 4 (North London)	Single-sex 'all boys' state secondary	1	4	10	160
		2	4	10	160
School 5 (Surrey)	Mixed state academy	1	1	10	28
		2	0	N/A	0
School 6 (South East London)	Mixed State Academy	1	4	10	150
		2	4	10	150
School 7 (South East London)	Mixed state secondary	1	2	10	160
		2	2	10	160
Total			53		988

*1 = Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Workshop, 2 = Activating for Change Workshop

Workshop Pre and Post Evaluation Survey Data

	Girls	Boys	Non-Binary/Other	Total
Pre-Workshop 1	284	274	23	581
Post-Workshop 1	261	256	23	540
Pre-Workshop 2	122	107	11	240
Post-Workshop 2	79	77	7	164



Key Findings

Effective student workshops

The student feedback from both workshops was overwhelmingly positive. 88.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Workshop 1 improved their knowledge of sexual violence and the different forms it takes. Focus group participants similarly discussed how Workshop 1 enhanced their understanding of sexual violence. In accordance with RSE guidance, students learnt what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual violence and why these are always unacceptable. They learned that sexual violence exists in different, but interconnected forms, and that more 'everyday', trivialised and normalised forms of sexual violence, like street harassment and that which happens on or through digital devices, also constitutes sexual violence, in addition to physical forms (sexual assault and rape).

Girl: The workshop really taught me the different acts of sexual violence, and what sexual violence is, and everything. And how one little thing without your consent is sexual harassment and sexual violence. (School 6, Year 10, South East London, mixed academy)

Boy: and I learnt that there's a cycle to sexual harassment, it's not just rape, there's other ones as well. (School 4, Year 9, North London, 'All Boys' School)

Girl: I thought that it was extremely informing to learn about image-based abuse online, and also learning about other sexual violence that there could be online. At the workshop, I even learnt what the definition of slut-shaming was. (School 1, Year 9, Norfolk, Mixed state secondary)

A high percentage of students (86.4%) agreed that Workshop 1 improved their knowledge of what digital sexual violence is and the actions it describes.

Girl: In school . . . we don't get taught about like the sexual harassment online. (School 5, Year 9, Surrey, mixed comprehensive)

Boy: [we were taught] about safe sex, and also legal punishments for if you have sex if you're under the legal age. But it was very general. It wasn't very in-depth.

Interviewer: And did you learn anything about the digital issues?

Boy: No. (School 2, Year 9, Cornwall, mixed comprehensive)

Boy: I didn't realise being sent like a dick pic was classed as sexual harassment, I thought it was kind of like normal because it's been normalised over the past few years and stuff. It's good to know that it's not normal and you shouldn't just like leave it to one side and stuff. (School 6, Year 10, South East London, mixed academy)

Nearly 90% of respondents (88.4%) said they would apply the content of the workshop to their relations with others and 85% agreed/strongly agreed they would recommend the workshops to others.

Post-Workshop 2 survey responses similarly revealed that most students were extremely satisfied with their learning experience. For example, 92.1% agreed/strongly agreed that the workshop improved their understanding of activism and how to challenge sexual violence. Almost all respondents (97%) agreed/strongly agreed that the workshop increased their awareness of how to be an active bystander in situations of sexual violence.

Boy: I really enjoyed learning about activism, and how we can help with combatting sexual assault and empowering victims of sexual assault. It really helps everyone to learn how to do this. (School 6, Year 10, South East London, mixed academy)

These findings were confirmed by focus group participants who reported that Workshop 2 equipped them with knowledge and strategies for challenging sexual violence and, in several cases, that these new tools would help foster behaviour change, particularly around bystander intervention.

Girl: "I think the second [workshop] was especially good because it gave you examples on how to help, or what to do if you experienced that. At least now I know...if I was going to intervene, I know how and the best way for me and for them to do it." (School 4, Year 3, Hampshire, mixed comprehensive)

Several students also noted how Workshop 2 impacted on their personal outlook on life and how, armed with this new knowledge, they would act differently in the future.

Boy: I felt very enlightened by the two sessions I've had. It's made me have a completely different outlook on my life, and how I would act in the future. I feel like a completely different person now. I feel like I've matured through these sessions. ... Like how I know not to be violent, or to touch anyone without consent. (School 7, Year 10, South East London, mixed academy)

Interviewer: Do you think that the things that you learned will change the way that you act or change your behaviours in any way?

Boy: 100% yes.

Interviewer: Could you explain?

Boy: Yes, like with consent, I would know how to ask someone for consent [...]

Boy: I now know how to help when I see them in precarious situations involving sexual assault, and etcetera. Like how I can support them and inform them who to tell about it. (School 6, Year 10, South East London)

Students noted that the workshops gave them a space to empathise with other people's experiences, empowering them to act against sexual violence and to stand in solidarity with victim-survivors of sexual violence. Echoing the survey findings, many focus group participants said that the activity on bystander intervention equipped them with concrete solutions for challenging sexual violence.

A high proportion of students (90.3%) thought that Workshop 2 increased their understanding of digital defence strategies to stay safe online and 86% thought the workshop enhanced their knowledge of self-care strategies when using social media. We asked the students, "[a]fter attending the workshop will you do anything differently?" More than a third (39%) of respondents said yes. Comments on the evaluation surveys included, for instance:

- "I'll report more things that happen to people and be an active bystander."
- "Stand up for others when needed."
- "When I see someone being harassed, I will do something about it."
- "Try and stop people from sharing nudes."

Resistance to the workshops

We also encountered some level of resistance and critiques of the workshops. In our pre and post workshops, between 10% of girls and 16-20% of boys disagreed that Workshop 1 had improved their knowledge of sexual violence and digital sexual violence. We categorised the critical and resistant responses to Workshop 1 into three main sub-categories, namely: 1) discomfort that the workshop did not focus equally on boys and men's experiences of sexual violence; 2) explicitly defensive or hostile reactions, including those perpetuating rape myths; and 3) progressive/constructive critiques about the need to discuss men as victims.

Some of these complaints were rooted in deep seated rape myths and refuting the gendered nature of sexual violence:

Boy 1: You see a lot about it's mostly men, it's all men that commit these crimes, but it's kind of misleading because it doesn't really say that it's a small percentage of men. So, a lot of people can read it as all men have done this.

Boy 2: Yes, that makes out that every man is bad and that they'll all rape someone. (School 4, Year 9 North London, 'All Boys' School)

Critical suggestions for how to improve the workshop included suggestions on having more discussion of 'toxic masculinity' related to why boys 'don't speak up' or report violence and challenging the myth of the 'strong man.'

Girl: It's just that the reason men don't report it is because they're seen to be, they like to be a man. They're supposed to be stronger and not viewed as they can be harassed because they're supposed to be the ones that are supposed to enjoy it, because that's what people have said that they're supposed to be. (School 7, Year 10, South East London, mixed academy)

Our findings indicate that new strategies are needed to help boys move from defensive to empathetic engagements with gender-progressive pedagogies. The workshop piloting showed us that there is an urgent need to create a greater awareness of boys' intersectional experiences both as potential perpetrators and victims. We also need more attention to how particular boys may be less able to talk about their own victimization and vulnerabilities (that they are at risk of male violence as well for instance) which could help to counteract the 'false rape accusations myth' and anti-feminist male victimization narratives.

Teacher Survey Key Findings

Post-workshop surveys distributed to teachers showed that the training workshops were also rated as highly effective. For example, almost all respondents (95%) agreed or strongly agreed that the training workshop had improved their knowledge of what sexual violence is and the different forms it takes, in particular those forms experienced, witnessed, and enacted by young people. The majority of teachers (82.5%) said that since attending the training workshop, they would feel more confident responding to a disclosure/intervening in an incident of sexual violence made/experienced by a student and that they would feel better able to teach/empower young people to challenge sexual violence.

“I sent out the Stats for Survey straight away and 25 people fully responded and staff comments were, 100% I feel confident now on how to deal with a disclosure, and the majority of staff said that we need to start teaching this at a younger age. And now I think they feel from reading the survey results, most of the staff feel more confident in how to deal with it as a result of the training, which is great, and it was what I wanted to open and see really. I wanted to see the staff say they are more confident.”

Furthermore, most teachers (89.8%) said they would apply the content of the training workshop to their relations with others and 92.5% agreed/strongly agreed that they would recommend the training to others.

“I thought the staff training was brilliant and... maybe we just buy in those external expertise and we then have the parent sessions. And as many people say, as a school, you can only go so far, you can offer everything, you lead a horse to water, you can't make those parents come and you can't make those students understand or believe those things, but we can educate them in it.”

When asked if they would do anything differently after attending the training workshop, more than two thirds of respondents (76.9%) said yes, including the following:

“I am going to look at our programme and incorporate the delivery of the workshops you have provided. In addition, I will be looking to ask your group to come in and work with our students on this topic.”

“Provide my pupils with more information in order to be able to challenge these behaviours.”

“I will seek out resources that best help me to deliver sex-positive lessons that are not based purely on risk and ‘what could go wrong’, but rather in understanding what is positive and healthy.”

“I will explicitly teach what is sexual violence to our students and to use the resources explored.”

“I am going to include Activating for Change more explicitly in my sessions.”

Teachers also noted the effectiveness of our monthly workshops, delivered online, in regard to educating them about the nature of (digital) sexual violence, and why young people do not report. For example, 85% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop improved their knowledge of what sexual violence is, and the different forms it takes.

A further 87.2% agreed or strongly agreed that the workshops specifically improved their knowledge of digital sexual violence. 82.5% of teachers also commented on how the workshops improved their understanding of why young people underreport incidents of sexual violence, and 82.5% agreed that our workshops enabled them to feel better able to teach and empower young people to challenge sexual violence.

A further 89.8% of teachers said they will apply the content of the workshop to their relations with others, and a further 92.5% said they would recommend this workshop to others.

Our survey and focus group data highlight several critical reflections that can be used to improve current and future RSE interventions. Participants articulated their dissatisfaction with the existing RSE curriculum, their general lack of confidence in teachers as workshop facilitators, and distrust in their schools' safeguarding policies and abilities to respond effectively to disclosures of sexual violence. We also found there to be different gendered responses to the workshops. Based on our findings we provide several recommendations for schools, parents and carers, young people, and the Government.

Recommendations

For schools

We have developed an [exploratory checklist](#) for a whole-school approach to sexual violence prevention, getting schools to consider how aspects such as the curriculum, policy, procedures, training and staff attitudes, and student knowledge can create a culture where sexual violence is not tolerated, and victims are supported.

Educate young people about sexual violence from an early age

Schools can play a key role in supporting young people's understanding of sexual violence and how it can be facilitated by digital technologies. Comprehensive relationships and sex education, including age appropriate RSE in Primary School, can serve as a form of sexual violence prevention. Relationships and sex education lessons are an ideal space to learn about consent, ethical decision making, positive relationships, gender, power, and online harms. However, schools should not only examine their curricula but the whole-school culture, including staff attitudes, and policies and procedures, and ensure these do not contradict messages communicated in RSE.

Engaging young people of all genders in age-appropriate conversations about sexual harassment and sexual violence can normalise those conversations and limit backlash later down the line. Our experience with students and our conversations with teachers indicated that boys and young men can sometimes feel resistant to these discussions in the classroom, particularly if they have come across rape myths which defy the existence of gender-based violence in other contexts, or have been made to feel defensive by unnuanced conversations which don't recognise that boys and men are also victims of male violence. This is why it is so important to educate about the issues addressed in these workshops at an early age, and to give all young people a forum to discuss their concerns with trusted adults who are adequately equipped to navigate their complexity in a sensitive and well-informed way.

Sexual violence prevention education should be delivered by trained experts - ideally external to the school

The majority of students lacked confidence in their teachers' abilities to deliver the workshops, citing barriers such as teachers' lack of knowledge and experience; shared feelings of embarrassment; fear that information disclosed might be reported to school authorities and parents; and the issue of confidentiality vis-a-vis school safeguarding rules. Overall, students feel that external specialists delivering RSE is a more effective approach than their own teachers delivering the session. Some students felt only one or two key members of staff could deliver material, meaning that there is a need for further school and staff training to increase competencies and skills on these topics amongst school staff.

All teaching and non-teaching staff should undergo comprehensive sexual violence prevention and response training (which links to RSE curriculum and whole school policies)

To deliver effective consent or sexual violence prevention education, educators must have a thorough understanding of trauma-informed practice; the myths and misconceptions around sexual violence; what constitutes harmful messaging such as victim-blaming and why this is harmful; the gendered nature of sexual violence; sexual violence support services; and how to unpack and discuss these concepts safely with young people. Thorough training and experience are needed to attain this level of expertise.

Regardless of their role in the school, all staff should be trained to identify and challenge harmful sexual harassment and abuse, and appropriately respond to disclosures. Many of the forms of sexual violence discussed in our workshops were normalised by both students and staff - a whole-school effort is needed to unpick this.

Students' voices should be centred

We identified a disconnect between schools lacking certainty about how to effectively respond to sexual violence, and students' nuanced awareness of the issues facing them and what would help. Student voice and participation is crucial. Meaningfully engaging students in a dialogue about how to prevent and respond to sexual violence not only helps students feel seen and valued in their school, but also provides schools with in-house ideas to develop strategies to better support their young people.

Visit AGENDA for ideas about how to meaningfully engage your students in shaping the school's ethos or auditing your RSE curriculum and see Good practice guide for teaching Relationships and Sex(uality) Education (RSE).

Ensure reporting processes are clear and transparent

Students lacked confidence in school reporting mechanisms, and teachers who attended our training and events also expressed their concerns around the tension between safeguarding policies and student rights. Overall, our qualitative and quantitative data showed that under-reporting of sexual harassment and abuse is common and in particular, students almost never report digital sexual violence, including cyberflashing and image-based sexual harassment and abuse (IBSHA), to their school. See our Online Sexual Harassment: School Policy, designed to support school leaders to implement best-practice approaches and recommendations to prevent and manage young people's experiences of online sexual harassment, including a policy checklist, and our report on Understanding & Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse.

In the short term, we recommend that safeguarding procedures are transparent and accessible to young people. This includes being clear on the limits to confidentiality, for example when parents or carers may be involved. This empowers survivors of sexual violence or other harms to make an informed decision whether to report. This requires clearly written, accessible and simple guidelines for students around what happens if they report sexual violence, including digital sexual violence, to their school. The process should then also be verbally communicated to students, for example during tutor time, and the guidelines should be easy to find, e.g., contained in homework diaries or displayed on posters.

In the long-term we recommend a more transparent and youth rights and victim-survivor rights-based approach is taken to safeguarding in schools and other youth organisations.

For parents and carers

Create a safe environment where your child feels able to talk to you if they need to

Students were generally unwilling to talk to their parents about sexual and gender-based violence they experienced or witnessed. Whilst it's important that parents respect their children's boundaries, it's also important to ensure that children feel safe and able to talk if they need to. We recommend explaining and demonstrating to your child that if there's anything that happens on or offline that makes them feel worried, angry, anxious or odd, they can speak to you, that they won't be in trouble, and that there are many people who can help them.

These conversations need to start from an early age, e.g., when a child gets their first device, or even beforehand if their friends have a device already. Ideally, conversations would be small and regular, in order to normalise conversations about online safety, ethical decision making and digital selfcare. Visit ASCL - See: 'Challenge Sexual Violence - Checklist for Change' for details about relevant support services for children and parents.

We have also developed guidance on [What to do if your child experiences digital sexual violence](#) and [How can I respond if my child experiences digital sexual violence](#).

Favour conversations and education over digital solutions to online risks and harms

Although many parents use filters and controls to monitor their children's online activities and keep them safe, most young people know how to bypass these filters. As a result, while parental controls can certainly play some role in parenting strategies, they are a poor substitute for educating young people about the technologies they use, privacy settings, and what to do if or when things go wrong. Furthermore, using such digital control mechanisms does not help young people learn to navigate the digital world they live in and will continue to live in when they grow up and leave home.



For young people

Tell your school what you want to see

Students are well-placed to help their schools understand the issues they are facing and what they'd like to see changed. Sometimes it can take a while to get their voices heard, so they should try to find like-minded peers to provide them with emotional support if they're speaking out about something they care about. Students should think about whether there's a particular teacher who they could approach who might be able to help them. They could also look online for inspiration - websites like Everyone's Invited have template letters they can send to their school to encourage them to do more to prevent sexual violence.

Above all, students should make sure they prioritise their own safety and well-being. If things feel too much, or they need support, they should speak to an adult they trust, or contact an external support service - there are some listed [here](#).

We have also developed [Tips for digital self-care](#).

For Government

The Department for Education and Ofsted must provide clearer language and terminology relating to the scope and forms of technology-facilitated sexual and gender-based violence (TFSGBV). This will help young people to recognise practices which are often normalised, trivialised, or dismissed. Current policies do not reflect the breadth of young peoples' lived experiences, particularly technology facilitated risks and harms, nor offer advice on appropriate victim support.

Relationships and sex education plays a key part in sexual violence prevention, yet schools lack funding for staff training, including on trauma-informed practices around responding to disclosures and understanding sexual violence, all of which are vital to the delivery of high-quality RSE. Policies, guidance, and inspections can only go so far: adequate funding to genuinely address the issues evidenced in this research is essential.

Resources

- [Support services for parents and carers](#) – A list of resources and places to turn if your child experiences digital sexual violence.
- [Resources we love – School of Sexuality Education \(schoolofsexed.org\)](#)
- [Social Media Reporting](#)
- [Guidance for Schools](#)
- [A whole-school approach to sexual violence prevention: Exploratory evaluation checklist.](#)
- **What is trauma and why is it important to be [trauma-informed](#)?**
- [Useful resources for schools on RSE, sexual violence prevention and trauma-informed practice.](#)
- [Advice for parents and carers if their child experiences online harms and support services.](#)
- [Tips for digital self-care](#) for young people.
- Sexual violence [support services](#).