Challenging victim blaming language and behaviours when dealing with the online experiences of children and young people

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Internet Safety

Challenging victim blaming language and behaviours

This guidance has been produced by the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) Education Working Group, on behalf of UKCIS.

It is non-statutory and should be used as a guide to support the learning and development of professionals and to inform policies and procedures related to responding to incidents of online abuse and safeguarding children and young people.

Who is this for?

This guidance is aimed at professionals in education settings working with children and young people. It aims to help them better understand, recognise and respond to victim blaming language and behaviour within their settings when discussing or responding to the online experiences of children and young people.

What does this guidance cover?

This guidance describes the language, attitudes and behaviours that can be considered victim blaming when talking about the online experiences of children and young people. It encourages professionals to think critically about their own or others' language and behaviour, its impact and the ways they should be challenged.

The guidance outlines key principles to consider, practical strategies to challenge victim blaming attitudes and case scenarios to reflect on current practice.

Advice from this guidance can be incorporated into current safeguarding and child protection policies within education settings. The scenarios can be used to support professionals to reflect on their own experiences and current practice, and adopt strategies to develop a whole setting anti-victim blaming approach.

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Part One: Victim blaming

What is victim blaming?

Victim blaming is any language or action that implies (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that a person is partially or wholly responsible for abuse that has happened to them. It is harmful and can wrongfully place responsibility, shame or blame onto a victim, making them feel that they are complicit or responsible for the harm they have experienced.

People of all ages can display victim blaming attitudes and it can happen both online and offline. Education professionals are encouraged to think critically about the language they use and the impact that it has, both in the moment and more widely across society.

Terminology used in this guidance

For ease of understanding, the term 'victim' has been used within this guidance to describe a child or young person who has experienced online abuse, in any form. This includes abuse from an adult, or another child or peer.

In practice, different terms may be used, for example victim or survivor. Many children or young people who have experienced online abuse would not consider themselves a victim, and would not refer to themselves as such. However a young person identifies, it is important that the adult response is supportive and non-judgemental.

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Why does this matter?

Technology is a big part of everyday life, bringing endless educational and social benefits and opportunities, for adults, children and young people.

However, there are potential harms children and young people may encounter when online, including online child abuse, bullying, harassment or criminal exploitation. The consequences and impact of online child abuse can be just as severe as abuse experienced offline. For more information see NSPCC's 2018 report "Everyone deserves to be happy and safe".

Why is victim blaming harmful?

Blaming children and young people for their own abuse is never acceptable.

Professionals should clearly understand that children can never be expected to predict, pre-empt or protect themselves from abuse. Irrespective of the context or circumstance, the responsibility always lies with the person who abused the child or young person.

Children and young people may feel they are to blame

One of the greatest barriers to a child or young person seeking help and reporting online abuse, is feeling they are to blame for something that has happened to them. When professionals working with the child or young person speak or behave in such a way that reinforces this feeling of self-blame, the impact of the abuse the child or young person has already experienced may be greater, leading to a longer recovery.

In contrast, positive responses (where victim blaming attitudes are not present) can reduce feelings of post-traumatic stress, depression and health issues (Campbell, 2001) which a young person may experience as a result of abuse occurring. They can also encourage other children and young people to report their online experiences.

Children and young people's experiences may not be treated as a safeguarding concern

When victim blaming occurs, there is a risk of diminishing the child or young person's experiences, leading to a lack of, or an inappropriate, safeguarding response. This could be by professionals initially dealing with an incident or by those involved subsequently.

This can have a devastating impact for the child or young person who has experienced abuse and make it less likely that they, or their peers, will have the confidence to disclose abuse in the future. In addition, victim blaming attitudes can prevent families, friends and wider society from recognising certain behaviours as abuse.

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How does victim blaming present?

Whether consciously or unconsciously, our use of both written and verbal language and the way in which something is described, can have a big impact on how it is perceived and people's attitudes as a result.

Language and behaviour that implies that a child or young person is complicit in, or responsible in some way, for any harm or abuse they've experienced or may experience is victim blaming.

Direct and indirect victim blaming

Direct victim blaming happens when a child or young person is explicitly held responsible for what has happened to them.

Here are some examples of direct victim blaming:

- In the context of non-consensual nude image sharing, professionals may blame the child or young person for sharing the image in the first place, and say what's happening to them is their fault because they sent the image.

- After receiving an abusive message online, a professional may say it's the child or young person's fault for accepting a friend request from someone they didn't know on social media.

- After being bullied through an online game, a professional decides not to take any action because they think the child or young person is partly to blame for playing an online game with a minimum age requirement that is older than they are.

- In the context of online blackmail, a professional tells a child or young person they should not have responded, but blocked and reported the person as soon as they started sending threatening messages.

Indirect or unintentional victim blaming can be harder to identify. It often happens when a person is trying to help a child or young person after something has happened to them. However, that 'help' reinforces the idea that the child or young person has done something wrong or is responsible for what has happened to them.

Here are some examples of indirect victim blaming:

- Taking away the child or young person's device or banning them from using an online platform, app or game as a consequence.
- Delivering online safety education to a child or young person immediately after a disclosure, which highlights what they should have done to keep themselves safe.
- Inferring or suggesting that a child or young person should take responsibility for keeping themselves safe online. For example, saying a child or young person

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'shouldn't place themselves in danger' or 'put themselves at risk' by doing *x* or using *y*.

- When speaking to the child or young person after a disclosure, telling them what they should have done differently in that situation in order to keep themselves safe.

Part Two: Challenging victim blaming

Challenging victim blaming can be difficult and should be done in a constructive and supportive way that encourages people to think critically about the language and behaviour they use and the impact that it has. Many professionals might not realise what they are saying or doing is victim blaming.

The following practical steps will help you practice and advocate for an anti-victim blaming approach that is timely, sensitive and helps you understand the impact of words and actions.

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Key principles

1. Remember children lack control in abusive situations

Ensure your own language and behaviours reflect the lack of control that children and young people have in abusive or exploitative situations, and explain this to others.

For example, instead of saying "*what could x have done to stop this from happening?*", focus on the tactics or methods the other person used to encourage, deceive and manipulate the child or young person as part of an abusive situation.

2. Focus on the behaviour of the person who abused the child or young person

Think about what language is used to describe a situation or how it can be framed to focus on the abusive behaviour, and not the behaviour of the child or young person who has experienced abuse. By focusing on the abusive behaviour or actions, it reframes the narrative to the responsibility or onus being on the person who abused the child or young person.

For example, instead of saying "*why did you do x?*" instead say "*tell me about what happened to you*" which shifts the focus away from the child or young person's actions or behaviour and helps them understand it wasn't their fault.

3. Be open to children and young people's lived experiences

Often, victim blaming language and behaviours come from not truly understanding the nature of child abuse or children and young people's experiences. Common online behaviours for children and young people might be different to your own, and it's crucial to listen and keep an open mind so you can learn more about their lived experiences. Research can also help you to understand children and young people's online experiences. For example, Ofcom's annual *Children and parents: Media use and attitudes* report contains the latest findings.

Nude image sharing or 'sending nudes' is a good example. Although statistics show not every child or young person is sharing or receiving nude images, some are and this increases as they get older. As professionals, it is important we understand this behaviour and feel confident to be able to talk about these issues in a way that doesn't victim blame children and young people by saying they shouldn't do it.

4. Explain the impact of victim blaming language and behaviour

Help others consider the impact of using victim blaming language or behaviours and what effect this might have on a child or young person.

For example, it may reinforce feelings of self-blame, and the impact of the abuse the child or young person has already experienced may be greater, leading to a longer recovery or serious long-term harm to confidence, self-esteem and relationships. It may also stop them, and others speaking out in the future.

5. Review policies and procedures

Ensure your setting's policies and procedures promote anti-victim blaming attitudes and language. You can add in guidance and tools that help create a unified response to challenging these attitudes in a positive and constructive way.

You may also wish to review the educational resources that are used in your setting, particularly resources focussed on relationships and sex education, and online safety. Some widely used resources may portray unhelpful victim blaming messages by, for example, focussing on what happened when a child or young person did not resist or 'just say no', or applying harmful gender assumptions such as portraying boys as perpetrators and girls as victims.

6. Model the language and behaviour you expect from others

Model the language and behaviour you expect from adults, children and young people, and ensure that victim blaming is challenged. Remember, you won't always get it right, and victim blaming is common in our society. This is why opportunities for learning and reflection are important.

7. Make time for learning and reflection

We all have a responsibility to ensure that victim blaming language and behaviours are challenged in our settings and communities. The best way to educate others is to reflect together on victim blaming language and behaviours, and how to identify and challenge them in a supportive and open way.

The next section provides some scenarios which will help you to do this.

Part Three: Putting this guidance into practise

This section is designed to give your setting the opportunity to discuss, test and apply the principles we have outlined. There are several online scenarios which provide the opportunity to reflect on the best way to support the child or young person and apply a 'no-blame' approach, and help you identify areas of strength and any changes or improvements to be made.

Group discussion of the scenarios is recommended, where possible. This allows for different perspectives to be considered, supportive challenges (for example, where there may be unconscious bias) and enhancement of individual and collective learning. This can support a unified approach and consistent action across the setting.

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Creating a safe space for discussion

It's important to create an environment that doesn't blame or shame professionals for any language or behaviours they may use. Scenarios help to distance the learning and get professionals to reflect on the situation and apply what they have learned. Try not to use examples from colleagues where you've seen them get it wrong or linking to specific cases, for example, making comparisons like 'this scenario is like what *x* did'. This may cause shame or embarrass colleagues and make them disengage with the discussions.

Before using the scenarios, make it clear that situations where children and young people have been abused online can be complex and talking them through will help everyone to get a better understanding of how best to respond.

It is possible that professionals will feel worried about saying the wrong thing or feeling that they do not understand what children and young people are seeing and experiencing. Reassure all participants that they are not expected to know all the answers and that this is a chance to reflect, learn and put what they have learned into action.

Using pairs or small groups of professionals who know each other can help them to open up. You could also choose to have a selection of the scenarios displayed around the room to read through at the start of the training and add sticky notes with questions, thoughts and ideas to get the conversation started.

How to use the discussion scenarios

Introduce the topic of victim blaming
Before using the scenarios, you must introduce the topic of victim blaming and cover the key points outlined in this guidance. Even if you have shared this guidance in advance, talking through the key points will help ensure everyone has the same understanding of the topic.

Focus on finding solutions
When discussing the scenarios, focus on identifying victim blaming language and behaviours and how they could be challenged or changed in a positive and supportive way.

Reflect on own practices
Make sure time is taken to discuss what has been learned and how this can be put into practise in your setting. For example, you could identify a specific victim blaming behaviour which is prevalent in your setting and come up with an action plan to tackle it. Remember this should be a personal reflection and not a reflection on a colleague's past language and behaviour.

In most instances, the scenarios will be enough to give professionals the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and what they may change in the future.

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Discussion Scenario 1

This scenario invites professionals to apply what they have learned by asking them to identify victim blaming and consider how they could respond to it.

In small groups share the following scenario and ask each group to discuss the three questions. Possible answers and discussion points are included under each question.

Scenario

A 10-year-old tells a family member they have seen scary and inappropriate images on their phone. They didn't ask for help at school because teachers had told them again and again that they shouldn't be on social media and were clearly frustrated with the children. Staff had even been overheard complaining to parents about children and parents not following the rules and 'asking for trouble'.

Discuss

1. What victim blaming language or behaviours can you identify in this scenario?

   ● *Teachers telling the child they shouldn't be on social media. This has resulted in the child not telling them that something has happened to them as they may get told it is their fault.*

   ● *Staff saying children were not following the rules and 'asking for trouble'. This suggests it is the child and parents' fault that something has happened.*

2. How could you respond to the victim blaming language or behaviours displayed in this scenario?

   ● *Focus on the impact of the victim blaming language children may have overheard. Most teachers will want to help a child if they are in distress, but in this scenario the language used by staff has meant the child did not speak out about their experience to them or feel able to ask them for help.*

   ● *Be open to children's lived experiences. Research shows the majority of children under 13 have their own profile on at least one social media app or site, so this is a common experience. Remind staff that rather than telling children they shouldn't be on social media platforms, they should help them, and their caregivers, to be safer online.*

   ● *Remind staff that children lack control in abusive situations. It's not clear in the scenario if the child has accidentally come across scary and inappropriate images, or if they have been directly sent them. Either way, viewing something that has upset them is not their fault and support should be offered to the child.*

3. Could that happen in our setting? Do we need to do anything to change practice or train colleagues to avoid this?

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Discussion Scenarios 2

These scenarios are designed to encourage professionals to think critically about the language and behaviour that may currently be used in their setting or by other professionals. This is a good point to remind them that victim blaming ideas or beliefs may be deeply entrenched in our community and wider society. Looking at these scenarios is a way to challenge victim blaming directly, but in a constructive and supportive way.

Questions

Select a few scenarios and consider the following discussion questions. Possible answers and discussion points are included under each scenario.

a) If the child turned to a professional for help with this scenario, what do you think that professional might think or do?

b) What victim blaming language or behaviours should be avoided in this scenario?

c) What could professionals say and do that would be supportive?

Scenarios

1. An 8-year-old boy has shared information about themselves and what they like doing, with someone they met on a game on their console. They met and talked after bedtime on a game their parents told them not to play. The person now keeps messaging them, wanting to chat and play, and offering tips on completing the game. The child is getting annoyed with all the messages and wants to talk to someone they trust about what to do.

    a) *Some might think the child is partly to blame as they were talking to someone they don't know (a stranger) and playing games after bedtime. They might suggest they stop playing the game, or block the person and then they won't get any other messages. They might suggest the parents remove the device from the child's bedroom so they are not able to play after bedtime.*

    b) *Avoid:*

        ● *suggesting the child is to blame because they should not be talking or playing games with strangers. Talking to people you don't know is a common experience in online gaming*

        ● *focusing on the fact they were playing after bedtime. It's hard for children to self-regulate their online time, especially if they are excited about a game*

        ● *suggesting banning the child from the game or removing the device. This may reinforce any notion that what is happening is the child's fault*

    c) *Focus on the positive steps the child has taken in seeking help, reminding them what has happened is not their fault. Together, the child and professional should agree what actions to take, so the child feels in control of the situation. These actions should be positive, supporting them to be safer, rather than punishing them for what has happened. This might include blocking the person or looking for alternative games they could play. Any discussions with parents should also take a supportive approach and focus on how they can help their child to continue to enjoy gaming.*

2. A 13-year-old girl gets asked for nudes every day from new social media profiles. She is wondering if sending one nude will stop them asking and speaks to a friend for advice. Her friend wants her to speak to an adult, but she isn't keen on this idea. In the end the girl shares a picture in her underwear, making sure no-one can see her face. After sending the image, the girl finds out that other people in her class at school have seen the picture and have started calling her names behind her back. The girl is feeling very anxious, but is afraid to speak out and get help.

    a) *Some might think the girl is to blame for sending the picture, giving in to the pressure, not listening to her friend, or thinking that sending a picture without her face would mean no-one knows who she is. They might tell the girl there is nothing she can do now, as the picture is 'out there'. They might decide to do an assembly or year group session focused on not sending images.*

    b) *Avoid:*

- *suggesting the child is to blame because they sent an image. Experiencing pressure, nude image sharing, and subsequent non-consensual image sharing are all common experiences for young people*

- *suggesting they should have spoken out sooner or ignored or blocked the requests. It is common for young people to be asked for nudes online, and these requests do not always come from strangers but may have come from people the young person knows*

- *suggesting that sending a nude with no face was a silly idea. This is a common strategy used by young people in an effort to keep themselves safe*

- *saying there's nothing the young person can do now to take control of the image. There are some actions that can be taken*

- *any public statements to other children that an image is going around and they shouldn't share it, or organising any reactive online safety sessions about sharing images. This will highlight the actions of the girl and reinforce the idea that what has happened is her fault*

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c)   *Focus on the positive steps the child has taken in seeking help, reminding them what has happened is not their fault. Be mindful of the lived experiences of young people by acknowledging the pressure of being constantly asked for nudes, and how hard this must be. The behaviour of others, both the pressure to share a nude, and the actions of others post sharing is not OK, and this is hurtful and abusive. Together, the child and professional should agree what actions to take, so the child feels in control of the situation. This may include using the [Report Remove tool](#) to get the image taken down online, or asking peers to delete the image if they have received it. Speak directly to any other young people involved and let them know their behaviour is not acceptable.*

   Note - any scenario involving nude image sharing should be treated as a safeguarding concern and your organisation's policy should be followed.

3. A 10-year-old girl has created a social media account to share her passion for fashion and make up. She has posted a number of pictures of herself in the new clothes she got for her birthday – she loves her new 'grown-up' look. Other classmates have put mean and bullying comments on the posts and the girl is very upset. A friend has suggested she deletes all her social media accounts and photos, but she doesn't think this is fair.

   a)   *Some might think the girl is partly to blame for what has happened because she is not old enough to have a social media account. They may think dressing up to look older is behaviour which puts her 'at risk', or that this is not a suitable activity for a 10 year old. They may question the girl's privacy settings and who she allows to interact with her content on the platform, thinking it's people she doesn't know who have made the comments. They may ask why she didn't block those making mean comments, and may suggest it would be better to delete the account.*

   b)   *Avoid:*

   - *focusing on the actions of the child as being the problem. Focus on the behaviour of those who made the negative comments*

   - *suggesting she should not be on social media. Research shows most children have at least one social media profile by the age of 13, and it may be an age appropriate social media site*

   - *making any statements that suggest she was putting herself at risk by the types of pictures she was posting. Fashion and 'influencing' is a common interest for young people at this age, as they start to think about self-image and popular culture*

- *assuming these pictures were shared publicly and implying that the decision made by the girl to share the images widely is to blame for the situation. It is not clear how public the pictures are, the girl may have only shared the images with children she knows, and it is her peers rather than strangers who are engaging in the bullying behaviour*
- *telling her to delete the account. This could be seen as a punishment*

c)   *Focus on the positive steps the child has taken in seeking help, reminding them what has happened is not their fault. Focus on the behaviour of others and the impact this has had. Together, the child and professional should agree what actions to take, so the child feels in control of the situation. These actions should be positive, supporting them to be safer, rather than punishing them for what has happened. This might include looking at the privacy and reporting settings and how these features can help them stay in control of what they share, or know how to report unkind comments. If it's not an age appropriate social media site, it may also mean looking for alternative platforms. Any discussions with parents should also take a supportive approach and focus on how they can help their child to continue to enjoy being online. Speak directly to any other young people involved and let them know their behaviour is not acceptable.*

4. A 17-year-old boy has been exploring his sexuality online. He has downloaded some adult dating apps, and has been looking online for advice. He got chatting to some older men in a forum who have said he will know his sexuality for sure if he performs sex acts for them online, and this has made him feel very uncomfortable.

   a)   *Some might think the young person is engaging in 'risk taking' behaviours because he is exploring his sexuality, downloading adult apps and speaking with men online. They may suggest he stops going on the forums, and then he won't receive any more comments.*

   b)   *Avoid:*

   - *focusing on the actions of the young person as being the problem. Focus on the behaviour of those who made the comments*

   - *suggesting he should not be on adult dating sites or forums, as he may feel this is the only way for him to explore his sexuality.*

   - *making any statements that suggest he was putting himself at risk by his behaviours. His behaviours are a normal part of his development*

   - *telling him to delete the account. This could be seen as a punishment for his actions or his sexuality.*

c) *Focus on the positive steps the young person has taken in seeking help, reminding them what has happened is not their fault. Focus on the behaviour of others and the impact this has had. Together, the young person and professional should agree what actions to take, so the young person feels in control of the situation. These actions should be positive, supporting them, rather than punishing them for what has happened. This might include looking at the privacy and reporting settings and how these features can help them stay in control. If it's not an age appropriate social site, it may also mean looking for alternative platforms, or helping them create safety strategies to use adult platforms, or helping him to find other people, groups or services that can help them explore sexuality*

Discussion Scenarios 3

The final activity in this section asks you to think about any scenarios from your setting or past experiences which would be helpful to share and discuss with colleagues.

For safety, scenarios should relate to professional and not personal experiences. They should also be anonymised so those involved cannot be identified – this may relate to both names and specific details. You should also ensure scenarios are not current ongoing concerns, as this may shame professionals by not giving enough distance between what has happened, reflection and learning.

For each scenario consider the following questions:

1. What victim blaming language or behaviours can you identify in this scenario?

2. How could you respond to the victim blaming language or behaviours displayed in this scenario?

3. What can we learn from this scenario in order to change our current practice or train colleagues to avoid this?

Code of practice

After you have completed all of the activities, it's a good idea to create a code of practice or working agreement for your setting.

You can do this by:

1. Asking colleagues to list some of the 'Do's' and 'Don'ts' they think have come out of the activity discussions

2. Agree what should go on your list - keep it simple and easy to achieve

3. Decide how you will share and review your code of practice