



CANADIAN CENTRE *for* CHILD PROTECTION®
Helping families. Protecting children.

Trauma and Youth Who Have Experienced Online Exploitation

Youth who have had a sexual picture or video of themselves shared with others can experience significant distress about others seeing these images and how they will be perceived and treated as a result. In addition to the fear youth have about the reactions of their friends and peers, they can experience extreme distress about the reaction of adults in their lives. How adults (e.g. teachers, child welfare workers, law enforcement) respond to a youth who has experienced this type of exploitation and trauma is important. It can make the difference between the youth being able to process and cope with the situation or the youth becoming further distressed.

Here are some considerations for adults dealing with youth who have experienced traumatic stress as a result of online exploitation. To help a child feel supported and safe, it is important for teachers and other safe adults to understand issues related to trauma and how to shape their responses toward youth.



What can cause the traumatic impact on youth?

A child may experience traumatic stress from an online experience that:

- Was sudden or unexpected
- Was forceful or violent
- Is perceived by the youth as overwhelming or uncontrollable
- Left the child feeling helpless, unsafe and/or having a lack of control

(adapted from D. Bowers, presentation at the Missing and Exploited Children Conference, Winnipeg, May 2011)

What do youth in crisis need from an adult who is first responding?

- To feel safe and supported
- To not feel judged
- A model of how to react to this situation (e.g. a calm reaction from the adult)
- To know that they do not deserve what is happening to them
- A sense of control over what happens next
- A sense of hope for the future
- Concrete strategies for next steps to support them and to attend to the exploitation

What are possible behaviours youth might demonstrate?

Individuals have unique reactions to trauma. Not every child who has a traumatic response to online exploitation will show the same signs. The impact on an individual depends on a number of factors related to their personality, temperament, neurological make-up, past experiences, family dynamics, the type of support network they have and specifics related to the exploitation they experienced. It is important not to assume that a child is not distressed because they do not act the way an adult might believe someone in distress should behave. Sometimes the signs are obvious, and sometimes they are not easily detectable.

Responses may include:

- Feeling jumpy, nervous and easily startled
- Feeling agitated
- Having images, sensations or memories of the traumatic experience intruding into the youth's thoughts
- Feeling numb, frozen or shut down
- Pretending everything is okay
- Change in general behaviour, seeming "out of sorts"
- Difficulty regulating emotions – rapid, sometimes exaggerated, changes in mood, where strong emotions or feelings occur (such as uncontrollable laughter or crying, heightened irritability or temper cycle in a short period of time)



- Difficulty concentrating or learning new information
- Change in academic performance
- Resistance to going to school
- Trouble falling or staying asleep, nightmares
- Generalized fear and anxiety – a persistent feeling that they are not safe
- Difficulty trusting relationships
- Difficulty handling changes
- Substance misuse, cutting or disordered eating
- Withdrawal/lack of interest in activities they typically enjoyed
- Isolating herself/himself from friends
- Sense of helplessness, hopelessness and/or presenting a negative world view
- Extreme changes in the way s/he is dressing
- No observable behaviour changes
- Asserting that s/he is okay
- Acting as if nothing problematic has happened
- Stating s/he can deal with this on her/his own

How can an adult who is first responding intervene supportively?

- Put the youth at ease by letting her/him know you are here to help
- Keep the pace slow and calm
- Tell her/him that her/his safety and wellness are the most important concerns
- Tell her/him you care about her/him
- Tell her/him you are sorry this has happened to her/him
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation
- Allow her/him to tell what happened without interruption or insisting on a chronological narrative; ask her/him to try to tell you what happened as an observer looking at a movie of the situation to help her/him avoid reliving the experience
- Avoid asking “Why” questions and stick more to “Tell me more about that” or “Tell me how you responded to that” statements
- Listen without judgement or skepticism, providing positive feedback for the sharing of the experience
- If her/his account sounds confusing, avoid pressing for clarity at this time
- Don't make promises that may not be realistic
- Focus on problem solving and helping the youth clearly understand you are there to help sort this out and to assist in dealing with how this is affecting her/him, dealing with the exploitation and working toward attempting to bring resolution and closure to the matter



Steps for Parents to Help Their Child

Show support

Your unconditional love and support during this difficult and distressing time will help your child heal and move forward. It is important to avoid using this time for judgment, lectures, anger or catastrophizing the situation.

Build a sense of safety

Reassure your child that s/he is safe and there is no problem or situation that you cannot get through together. Reassure your child that s/he is not alone and that you will be there to help her/him.

Consult with professionals

This may be a stressful time for the entire family. It can be helpful to seek guidance, support and assistance from a mental health professional that has expertise in trauma and working with people who have been exploited. A mental health professional will know how to best support your child and the family unit during this difficult time. Seek out such professionals (e.g. psychologists, social workers, counsellors, psychiatrists) or speak with your family physician for a referral.

Learn about the impacts of trauma

Seek out resources to help you learn about trauma and how to support your child through her/his healing.

Give messaging of hope during the recovery process

Youth who have experienced trauma can regain trust, confidence and hope. They have the ability to create a new "normal" and function within it. Help your child see the world as manageable, understandable and meaningful. The stronger the belief that things will become and stay better, the more significant the child's recovery will be. Interestingly and importantly, hope is not just a feeling. The experience of hopefulness actually contributes to physiological chemical changes in the brain that calm fear and anger and allow for increased resiliency and healing (D. Bowers, 2011).

Help rebuild a positive sense of self and sense of control over her/his environment

When youth are going through a situation such as this, they may feel alone and powerless in their ability to control their own lives. In order to restore a sense of control, it is important to include your child in discussions about any next steps that include her/him and in decision making where appropriate.



Be patient and tolerant of moody behaviour

Youth who have a trauma response can demonstrate difficulty regulating their mood as they can be flooded by emotions. Set realistic expectations and be patient with changes in mood. Examples of moody behaviour may include agitation, anger, sadness, clinginess and outbursts.

Help manage overwhelming emotions

Stay calm and keep the environment low key. Be consistent and help your child understand, express and tolerate her/his strong emotions. S/he will get through it, reassure her/him that it will pass and it is just a feeling.

Help manage her/his flooding thoughts

Help your child see the links between her/his thoughts and feelings. Help her/him understand how working on controlling her/his thinking can help control how s/he feels. Consider exploring new activities that will help manage her/his thinking and emotions, such as yoga, art, music, etc.

Establish clear expectations

This should be done with flexibility and reduced consequences when rules are broken. Gently re-establish the boundaries.

Help your child stay connected to what s/he enjoys

Encourage and support your child to stay connected to family, friends and activities that s/he previously enjoyed.

Help to process her/his experience

Help your child shape her/his experience to have more control over what comes next in her/his life. Be available to listen and to help shape your child's beliefs of her/his life to understand that a negative experience doesn't define who s/he is. Your child has control over writing her/his life story.

Advocate for your child

Be your child's champion and work with professionals to help her/him recover from trauma. Help others to understand your child's behaviour and reactions through a trauma lens so their expectations are realistic and their responses are supportive and caring.

Take care of yourself

To be effective, you must take care of yourself. Taking care of a child who has experienced trauma is very difficult, and it impacts the entire family. Make sure to take time to access the supports necessary for the entire family.