



THE SCALE OF THE ISSUE



IN 2023/34

online grooming crimes reached record levels across the UK.

According to research by NSPCC, there were

7,062



'Sexual Communication with a Child' offences – up 89% since 2017/18 when the offence first came into force.

The most common platforms used to target children online were:



- SNAPCHAT 48%
- WHATSAPP (META) 12%
- FACEBOOK AND MESSENGER (META) 10%
- INSTAGRAM (META) 6%
- KIK 5%



In 2023/24

81% of children targeted were girls.



Children as young as FIVE have been victims of online grooming.



DIG DEEPER

According to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Command (the National Crime Agency team that focuses on protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation, both online and offline) grooming is a process that “involves the offender building a relationship with a child, and sometimes with their wider family, gaining their trust and a position of power over the child, in preparation for abuse.”

Grooming can happen anywhere, online, in organisations and in public spaces. Children and young people can be groomed by a stranger or someone they know and the age gap between a child and their groomer can be relatively small.

It can be easier online to pretend to be someone you're not, like a friend, mentor, boyfriend or girlfriend, and by doing this, criminals begin to form a relationship of trust with the young person.

Perpetrators typically use mainstream and open web platforms including social media chat apps, video games and messaging apps on consoles, dating sites and chatrooms as the first point of contact with children. They then encourage children to continue communication on private and encrypted messaging platforms where abuse can proceed undetected.

Grooming techniques can be used to prepare children for sexual abuse and exploitation, radicalisation or criminal exploitation. Offenders build trust digitally, then use threats, blackmail, or emotional control to move the child into real-world exploitation, whether sexual, criminal, or labour-related. In many cases, online grooming transitions seamlessly into physical trafficking.





SCAMMING COMPOUNDS

Recent international investigations have revealed how adults and young people are being deceived through fake job adverts and online recruitment scams, then trafficked into so-called ‘scam compounds’ abroad, where they are forced to conduct online fraud or romance scams under threat of violence. These cases, identified across South East Asia, demonstrate how online manipulation can evolve into in-person coercion, abuse, and forced criminality.

While these scam compounds are primarily an international phenomenon, the recruitment and grooming tactics used by traffickers mirror those increasingly seen in the UK, where criminals exploit social media and messaging apps to target young people with promises of easy income, friendship, or opportunities to earn online. Many of these interactions later develop into financial scams, sextortion, or money-mule activity, highlighting how online exploitation can be both a domestic and global risk. What begins as a simple online conversation can quickly lead to significant deception, control, and harm.



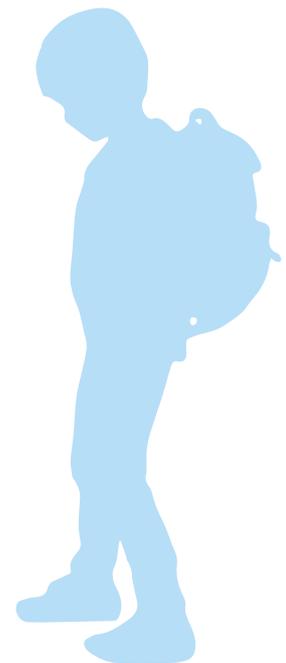
WATCH THE FILM

Tony Dunkerley, a former UK detective and international advisor on investigating human trafficking, explains more about protecting children from online grooming and exploitation.



<https://youtu.be/g8M11SfYzOw>

1. What struck you as you watched the film?
2. Are you aware of the potential signs that a child has been groomed online?
3. Do you talk openly in your family about what happens online and the potential risks?





READ LUKE 18 V15-17

A good test of knowing whether you have understood the gospel of Jesus Christ and the coming of the kingdom He proclaims, is your attitude towards children.

Children were very important to Jesus, and he valued their contributions and way of seeing the world.

In this passage, people bring children to Jesus to be blessed but the disciples tell them to stop. They think the kingdom is about different, 'more important' things and are focused on their own status and reputation rather than the children around them. Jesus challenges them to welcome and include the children in their midst.

Consistently in the Gospels, we see Jesus reaching out to and including the most marginalised or overlooked by society – the broken, the poor and the children.

Amazingly, as the church responds to this teaching and truly values children in our communities and encourages them in their faith, it can also protect them from other harms. Our inclusion of children, building trusted relationships and instilling wisdom and confidence, is a key protective measure against exploitation and abuse.

Also, as children are often naturally curious and inclusive, they have an ability to befriend those who don't look like them and bring joy to those they meet. Enlisting the children in your life to love their neighbours is a wonderful way in which their God-given personalities can be used in the work of the kingdom.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a little child? What is it about children that Jesus wants us to emulate?
- How can we show that we value the children in our community?
- How can we include the least impressive and weakest in society and show we value their insights and contributions?
- Make some resolutions about how you can welcome and love the children in your community better and show them that the kingdom of God is for them too



PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as you call us to receive your coming kingdom, help us to recognise the priority you give to the most vulnerable – especially to children.

Teach us to order our worship, our witness, and our fellowship in ways that extend this invitation, so that those who most desperately desire your blessing may be noticed and embraced in the common life of grace and mercy.

We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.



STORY OF HOPE - TONY DUNKERLEY

Tony is a former UK detective and international advisor on investigating human trafficking. During his time as a UK Police Detective and Covert Intelligence Officer, he gained extensive experience in managing serious and organised crime investigations at national and international level.

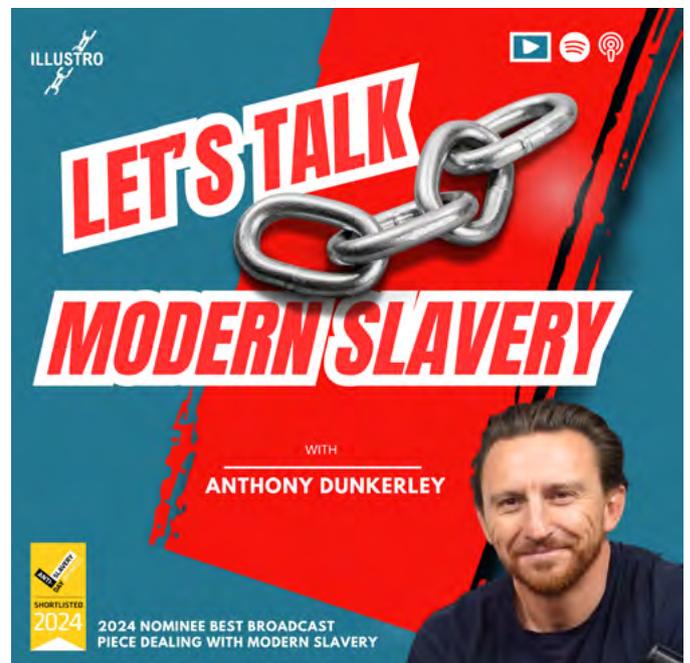
Tony is passionate about raising awareness of modern slavery, particularly amongst the next generation, and has delivered free assemblies and workshops on human trafficking and online safety to more than 3,000 children in the UK, Nigeria and Serbia.

He explains: “We wanted to understand how children in different countries were being groomed online and how it differed in three extremely different cultures and regions. We developed our own curriculum based on what we learnt.

“We discovered that children as young as four years old had some knowledge of being approached online by people they should not be speaking to. This is troubling because if you look at Instagram and other social media organisations, you will see that you’re supposed to be 13 years old to have profiles. Yet we were finding very, very young children who had profiles because it gave parents a little bit of a break and time off active parenting. These extremely young children were being approached online by strangers.

“Once we noticed this, we developed new curriculum, specifically for very young children. We discovered that talking about relationships and what a healthy relationship is really resonates with young children – they can understand the concept of applying ‘stranger danger’ in an online world, like they would offline.”

Tony has also pioneered the “Let’s Talk Modern Slavery Podcast” to raise awareness of modern slavery. The podcast consists of interviews with individuals from international law enforcement, survivor leaders and others in the global anti-trafficking community sharing their lived experiences of investigating cases, identifying suspects, protecting victims and empowering survivors.



Episodes have covered Femicide and Gender-Based Violence, Modern Slavery in Supply Chains, Human Trafficking & Terrorism and Forced Scamming. We would highly recommend **watching** or **listening** to the podcast – it is suitable for adults.

As well as schools’ education and the podcast, Tony leads a training programme on business and human rights to help organisations think about supply chain due diligence and other risks businesses face. If you own a business or know a business leader, you can find out more at:



www.youtube.com/@letstalkmodernslavery



PREVENTION

What children need to know: the signs of grooming

- Someone who wants to move the conversation to private messages.
- A person who gives constant praise, gifts (online or offline), or attention to build trust.
- Anyone who asks for secrets to be kept or tells you not to talk to adults.
- Someone who pressures you for photos, videos, or personal information.
- Promises of money, opportunities, or friendship that seem too good to be true.

Staying safe online

- Talk openly about what happens online - both the good and the bad.
- Talk about healthy relationships, boundaries, and consent - online and offline.
- Ensure children and young people are not on social media platforms under the appropriate age
- Ensure profiles are set to private
- Understand the risks of false profiles online, and the bad intentions of some internet users
- Opt out of public chat room functions
- Tell children not to share their full name, school, home address, or phone number online, and avoid posting photos or videos in school uniform or that reveal a location.
- Encourage children not to share passwords, even with close friends and to remember that once something is online, it can be copied or shared forever.
- Talk about what action to take if you are concerned you are being groomed online

If something happens

- Tell a trusted adult right away - a parent, teacher, or youth worker.
- Don't delete messages or images; they could be important evidence.
- Report it directly to:
 - CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command): www.ceop.police.uk
 - Childline: 0800 1111
- Block and report the person on all platforms.
- Do not meet anyone you have only met online.



ACTION – PRIORITISE PROTECTION

1. Consider the children in your life – are they informed about the risks of online grooming? Could you start a conversation today about some of the good and bad things that happen online?
2. Spend some time on the CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command) website: <https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/> It has interactive resources for 4-7, 8-10 and 11-18 year olds about staying safe online. It provides brilliant and age-appropriate information for young people. Who could you tell about this resource today?
3. Talk to your church, school and community leaders – could they run an age-appropriate seminar or assembly on what healthy relationships or wise choices online look like?