

Supporting Child Victims of Image-Based Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Best Practices for Immediate, Compassionate, and Trauma-Informed Response

Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA) is a deeply harmful experience that can leave children and teens feeling frightened, ashamed, confused, overwhelmed, and uncertain about where to turn. Whether the imagery was shared without consent or was manipulated or created through emerging technologies like generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), the subsequent trauma children experience is real and profound and deserves an immediate, informed response. Critically, trusted adults play a vital role in helping restore a child's sense of safety and control in the aftermath of image-based sexual abuse. Across all settings, the actions and language of an adult's response can meaningfully influence a child's recovery, sense of safety, and willingness to seek additional support or pursue criminal justice.

This resource provides adults responding to child victims of image-based sexual abuse — including parents, educators, law enforcement, and other trusted adults — with practical, trauma-informed strategies to ensure every child is met with compassion, empathy, and clear, actionable support, and that these things are offered in ways that protect a child's dignity, reduce harm, and promote healing.

1. Know the Issue
2. Understand the Impact
3. What Does a Victim-Centered, Trauma-Informed Response Look Like?
4. Resources & Where to Get More Help and Support

This document is intended for informational and supportive purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional therapeutic advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the guidance of a qualified mental health professional or other licensed provider with any questions or concerns you may have regarding your well-being.

COMMON TERMS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA) • **Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)**, often referred to as **child pornography** • **Deepfake nudes (synthetic non-consensual images)** or **AI-generated CSAM (GenAI-CSAM)** • **Nonconsensual reshares** • **"Sharing nudes," "sexting,"** or **"self-generated content"** • **Sextortion**



1 Know the issue

What is Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA)?

Image-based sexual abuse involves the non-consensual creation, sharing, distribution, manipulation, or threatened sharing of nude or sexual imagery. When a child victim is involved, the person depicted in the imagery is under the age of 18. Image-based sexual abuse can occur across a variety of contexts, including online and offline:

- Recording or capturing hands-on child sexual abuse.
- Recording or capturing sexual imagery without consent.
- Nonconsensual reshares of previously consensual content.
- Imagery produced as a result of coercion, manipulation, pressure, or sextortion.
- Imagery produced without consent and through generative AI or similar type technologies (e.g., “nudify” tools).¹
- Nonconsensual redistribution of imagery for sexual, social, relational, financial, or other motives.

Perpetrators of IBSA can be peers, adults, family members, acquaintances, or strangers. Perpetrator motivations may involve sexual gratification, financial extortion, desire to harm, relational conflict, peer pressure, bullying, and more.

2 Understand the impact

Children experiencing IBSA are highly likely to be experiencing complex trauma. Child victims of IBSA often describe:

Feeling exposed, violated, confused, and/or unsafe.

Deep feelings of fear, shame, and/or humiliation, manifesting as anxiety, panic, depression, and/or withdrawal.

Intense panic and hypervigilance about who has seen or could see the content.

Apprehension and distrust about whether they’ll be believed.

Anger, betrayal, and/or hopelessness.

Concerns about social repercussions, reputational damage, family reactions, and/or impacts at school or within the community.

The impacts of a minor’s abuse may be immediate and long-lasting, especially if the adult(s) a child discloses to responds inappropriately. It’s critical for anyone responding to these incidents to understand how trauma manifests, especially in relation to the child’s disclosure. It’s important to recognize that a child victim may present calmly or with overwhelming distress and that both are valid trauma responses. Critically, the victim’s current emotional state does not indicate the severity of harm experienced. Nor is it unusual for there to be a delay between a child’s IBSA victimization and the child’s disclosure of that victimization to a trusted adult.

YOUR RESPONSE MATTERS

You may be the first person to whom a child discloses. The warmth, clarity, and compassion of your response will influence how they process the trauma — whether they move toward safety and healing or experience additional harm.

All forms of IBSA, including IBSA involving the use of generative AI technologies, can result in confusion in how to respond. Depending on your position, you may be considered a mandatory reporter. The important thing to remember is to prioritize the child/teen’s protection and welfare. With the rapid advancement of generative AI, it is often impossible for the human eye to distinguish when generative AI technology has been used.

¹ These tools may also be referred to as “declothing” or “undressing” apps.

3 What does a victim-centered, trauma-informed response look like?

Victim-centered, trauma-informed responses prioritize a child's emotional safety, agency, and dignity, regardless of how or why the imagery was created. Effective responses start with recognizing the profound and often long lasting emotional, psychological, and social impacts of IBSA for child victims. Because child victims often experience fear, shame, confusion, and a loss of control, victim-centered responses emphasize the critical role trusted adults responding to IBSA incidents can play in restoring the child's safety, agency, and dignity. Child victims need adults to meet them with reassurance, hope, and clear, nonjudgmental guidance.

How does a victim-centered approach apply to generative AI CSAM?

As new technologies emerge, it is becoming increasingly easy to use GenAI to create deepfakes of real children. It is important to adopt a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach.

FACTS

1. It is NOT a victimless crime and/or harmless

- It involves real people and causes real psychological impact.
- It can cause impact and harm to body image, self-esteem and mental health.
- It creates real safety issues for many victims whose images are distributed, and they are recognized in public or have their private information passed on.
- Perceived "consent" does not remove harm. Children may not initially identify themselves as victims.

2. Viewing or creating GenAI CSAM is NOT 'harmless'

- GenAI CSAM imagery is illegal, emotionally and psychologically harmful, and deeply traumatic. Attaching a child's likeness to an image constitutes victimisation, even if it is artificially generated.
- Offenders and other groups online seek to frame GenAI CSAM as harmless, however, this is normalizing children as sexual objects for adults.

3. It is NOT harmless fun ('kids just being kids')

- Diminishing the validity or seriousness of these crimes causes more trauma to the victim.
- Regardless of the intent, it is important to teach children and teens about the harms and implement prevention practices. Ask them how they would feel if this happened to them – relating it back to empathy and the social and emotional outcomes.
- We must explicitly reject messaging that minimizes or excuses harmful behavior, like "kids just being kids".

What trauma-informed responses do

Prioritize acknowledgement and emotional safety. Assume the victim may be experiencing trauma. Use empathetic statements that validate emotions without minimizing the child's feelings of having been victimized. Reinforce that they are not to blame, their reaction is normal, their safety is your priority, and that you are there to hear them. Reiterate the strength it takes to tell someone and talk about it.

Assess immediate safety and needs. Explore psychological, physical, and digital safety concerns. Support victims in identifying trusted individuals who they may want involved and who can help. Help identify a checklist for first response:

- Preserve evidence (screenshots, URLs).
- Avoid confronting the perpetrator directly.
- Report to appropriate authorities and platform safety teams.
- Consider ways to remove/ takedown the content:
 - Set realistic expectations about content removal. While takedown tools are highly effective, complete eradication from the internet takes time and cannot always be guaranteed. Be honest about this limitation to maintain trust, framing the takedown process as a vital step in "harm reduction" and taking back control, rather than an instant fix.
- Develop a digital safety plan.

Center a victim's autonomy and control. Let them share based on their comfort level. Offer options—not directives—to support informed decision-making. Consider your obligations as a mandatory reporter if relevant.

Use clear, accessible language. Avoid technical or legal jargon. Where necessary, provide clarity in simple, easy-to-understand terms.

Provide actionable next steps. Explain confidentiality clearly. Clarify available pathways (e.g., reporting mechanisms, platform tools, legal remedies, NGO support) in neutral, optional language. Normalize seeking ongoing support.

Handle information with dignity and care. Reassure victims that the reports to NCMEC or law enforcement will be treated respectfully and securely.



4 Resources, additional information, and requests for more guidance

- If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.
- Know when and how to escalate/ report a case. Be sure to follow applicable protocols required by your organization. If you are unsure, ask someone.
- Consider reporting to law enforcement. If you are a mandatory reporter, this is a requirement.
- Encourage reporting of the content or conduct to platforms involved.
- Consider offering hotlines and crisis support resources (e.g., national helplines, school-based mental health support). Here is a free and anonymous 24/7 option: NCMEC's call center at 1-800-843-5678. You can also find further information and assistance at report.cybertip.org
- There is technology to help remove online nude, partially nude, or sexually explicit photos and videos of minors. Visit NCMEC's [TakeItDown](https://takeitdown.ncmec.org) (takeitdown.ncmec.org)

Practical scripts for trusted adults responding to IBSA involving child victims

Below are examples of supportive, trauma-informed language paired with harmful alternatives to avoid. Please note, that the way you respond and the language you use may require adjustments based on your profession, organizational protocols, and reporting requirements.

This document does not supplant any organizational policies, legal requirements, or mandatory reporting requirements as part of your agency's professional duties and responsibilities. Please use this section to incorporate your local legal requirements and/or organizational policies.

VICTIM-CENTERED, TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

I'm really glad you reached out. You deserve support and safety. We can take this one step at a time.

Thank you for telling me. I'm sorry this is happening to you. | You didn't do anything to cause this. You're not alone, and we will work through this together.

This kind of content can be created without your involvement or consent. Even when the image is fabricated, the harm and fear you're experiencing are very real. None of this is your fault. | I'm so glad you asked for help. This person took advantage of you. Let's figure this out together.

Your feelings make sense. | If you're up for it, I'd love for you to talk to me about what you are feeling. | Where would you like to start? | Let me know when you're ready to talk through a few support options together. You can decide what feels right for you.

Is there anything happening right now that makes you feel unsafe? What about emotionally? How about physically? What about feeling unsafe online? | Who in your life feels safe or supportive to talk to about this?

I can walk you through the reporting options available, so you feel comfortable understanding and/or choosing what comes next. *(reporting requirements may mandate subsequent next steps)*

We can try steps that often help reduce the spread of content, but I want to be honest that the process can take time. I'll support you through it.

I know we talked about a lot yesterday, and I just wanted to check in. How are you feeling today? You don't have to talk about it if you aren't ready, but I'm always here.

I'm checking in on the safety plan we made yesterday. Does it still feel okay to you, or should we make some changes?

HARMFUL FRAMING AND LANGUAGE TO AVOID

I'm taking your device away because you can't be trusted/ we can't trust who is online.

Why didn't you come forward sooner? | Why did you take the photo in the first place? | I've seen worse. This photo isn't that bad. | *GenAI CSAM:* Are you sure it's really that bad? It's not even a real photo. | *GenAI CSAM:* Can you prove you didn't take the photo?

You shouldn't have trusted that person. | You shouldn't have sent naked pictures to someone you don't know. | Are you sure that's how it happened? | *GenAI CSAM:* Well, it's not really you in the image, so it shouldn't bother you this much.

Are you lying to me? | I can't help you unless you tell me everything. | Here's what you need to do. Just follow these steps. | You have got to calm down so we can get through this process.

You're good, right? | Don't worry about this – it's just online.

You have to report this right now. | If you don't report this nothing will change/other children or teens will be harmed. | If you don't report this, there is nothing I can do for you.

Once the image is out there, there's not much we can do.

Are you over it yet?

Have you figured out what you're going to do next yet?



The Online Child Exploitation Prevention Initiative (OCEPI) consists of individuals and agencies specializing in efforts to prevent children from becoming victims of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Initiative members are experts including federal, state, and local law enforcement, ICAC Task Force members, researchers, educators, prevention specialists, training partners, and child protection organizations.

This project was supported by Grant #15PJDP-23-GK-00804-MECP awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The content was developed by the Online Child Exploitation Prevention Initiative. Opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the Initiative members and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

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