

# Learning Network

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

Issue 39 | March 2023

## Supporting Youth Experiencing Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence

The internet is a space in which youth (ages 13 to 29) connect with others, express themselves and assert themselves. But the internet feels less-safe to some young people. Sometimes unwanted sexual comments or images, exposure to racist or sexist content, or the sharing of personal messages and images without their agreement *does* happen.<sup>1</sup> Just as sexual violence impacts youth “in real life (IRL)”, technology-facilitated sexual violence effects young people as well.

If there are young people in your life, there are things you can do to prevent technology-facilitated violence, including sexual violence. There are also ways you can support young people. Accepting and normalizing youths’ online interactions, not blaming youth who face harm online, and being a safe person young people can talk to are some things youth say helps them to stay safe online.

The purpose of this Issue is to offer information on technology-facilitated sexual violence to adults – such as parents, teachers, guardians, aunties, elders, youth workers, and anti-violence workers. This Issue can help adults to talk with youth about technology-facilitated sexual violence to prevent violence and help young people facing violence to find support. Some parts of this Issue (laws, mandatory reporting for youth in need of protection, some resources) are specific to Ontario; but most of the information here applies to young people and their allies across Canada.

The information in this Issue draws from a number of Canadian sources. We especially want to thank the *Online and Okay Project* by [Women’s Support Network of York Region \(WSN\)](#). WSN is the community-based sexual violence support centre in York region, Ontario. Diverse and racialized youth, youth survivors of online sexual violence, and service providers in York Region contributed their thoughts and experiences to WSN’s *Online and Okay Project*. Their important contributions inform this Issue.



Nicole has worked with immigrant and refugee women experiencing domestic violence, marginalized populations of youth, and adult and youth survivors of sexual assault since 1998. She was the coordinator of the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) for over ten years and is currently OCRCC’s Writer & Advocate. Prior to this, Nicole worked as a counsellor and crisis line worker at the Sexual Assault & Violence Intervention Services of Halton (SAVIS), providing group, individual and crisis sessions to diverse youth, young people living in institutional settings, and Deaf and hard of hearing youth. Nicole currently provides case debrief and support to the crisis line team at Assaulted Women’s Helpline. [Click here to find Nicole’s published academic work.](#)



Authored by: Nicole Pietsch, MA 

## Sexual Expression and Connecting Online are Normal for Youth!

Youth spend a lot of time with others online. For example, nine in ten youth say they connect with friends and family on social networks, with almost half of these youth (44%) doing so every day.<sup>2</sup> Young people use the internet for lots of other activities important to them, such as posting pictures, videos, or memes on a social network (74%), playing online games (81%), and sharing content about a cause or event they care about (54%).

Different youth are using online spaces in different ways. While 2SLGBTQIA+<sup>3</sup> and racialized youth are less likely to post content about a cause or event they care about, they are *more* likely to join or support an activist group (52% of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth compared to 34% of heterosexual youth; and 44% of racialized youth compared to 33% of white youth).

The internet can also be an important space for community and support: youth who are 2SLGBTQIA+ are more likely to turn to online communities or social networks for support, as are youth with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> About two-thirds of all young people (65%) say they use digital tools to ask other youth for advice about a personal problem.<sup>5</sup>

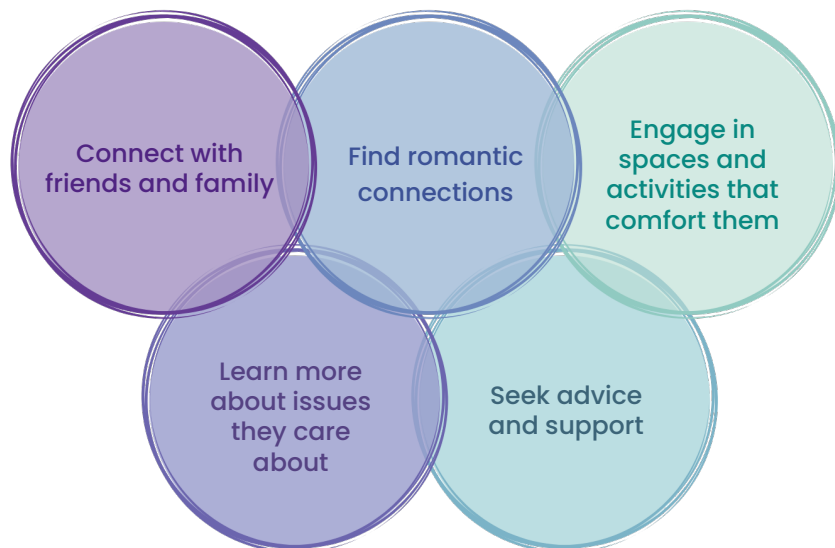


Young people value their privacy online and have a good sense of their rights online. Flirting and connecting with others is a part of life online for some young people. About a fifth of all older youth (that is, grade 11 and older) say they use the internet as a space to experiment with flirtatious behavior,<sup>6</sup> or to learn about relationships. On the other hand, some young people do not take part in flirtatious, romantic, or sexual communications online at all.

For those that do, when it comes to exchanging flirtatious and sexual content messages (“sexts”), youth say that their interactions are mostly consensual and respectful: the majority of youth who have sent sexts – almost three-quarters – say that their communications remained with the right person, and were not forwarded on without their agreement.<sup>7</sup> More, 9 in 10 Canadian youth say they would address unwanted personal content posted about them online—for example, by deleting it or asking someone else to delete it.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, consensual and respectful sexting is not the experience of all youth. Young people that end up in online and texting interactions that are coercive or non-consensual experience harm. Examples of this are discussed in the next section of this Issue.

Youth use technology for a variety of reasons including to:



# What is Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence?

Communicating, flirting and hooking up online are normal and healthy social practices. Doing something to hurt, shame, exploit, or embarrass someone online is *not*.

Here are some examples of technology-facilitated sexual violence.

## Online sexual harassment:

- contacting someone and pressuring them for a romantic or sexual interaction; repeatedly asking to hookup; continually asking for, nagging, or leading into sexual communications
- spreading sexual lies or sharing sexual truths online about someone's reputation; putting sexual putdowns, suggestions, or comments on someone's social media (i.e. "Ash is a slut"; "Remy likes the \*\*\*\*"; "You know you want to \*\*\*\*"), or to them directly over text/DM.
- making online/text threats or jokes to sexually assault someone; threatening to out someone as Trans, gender non-binary or another 2SLGBTQIA+ identity, or actually outing them online.
- **Distribution of intimate images without consent:** forwarding or posting a sexual, nude, or hookup picture or text to others without that person's permission.
- **Online sexual manipulation and online sexual coercion:** convincing or pressuring someone to send something sexual or nude (for example, a picture or sext).
- **Cyberflashing:** sending someone a sexual, nude, or hookup text without their consent.

Technology-facilitated sexual violence consists of acts of aggression, power, and control. Technology-facilitated violence should be named as violence. It is not just teasing, bullying, jokes, or flirting. It is not a consequence of young people being too open, sexual, or "easy" online either

In fact, all of the problems listed above can be criminal code offences.



## You need to know

It is *illegal* to produce, distribute, or view sexually explicit material involving people under the age of 18. Taking or sharing a sexual picture of someone who is under the age of 18 means producing and distributing child pornography—a serious criminal offence.

However, it is *legal* for two youth to produce or share sexually explicit material about each other, as long as it is consensual (that is, both people agree) and together: for example, pictures that are created together and shared only with one another (a boyfriend, girlfriend, partner or friend-with-benefits) and with both the young person's consent are okay.

If anyone in the community believes a young person is being harmed or exploited by an adult, it is their legal responsibility to report concerns to the Children's Aid Society. We all have an obligation to report suspected child abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

To learn more about the law and your obligations, go to:

- [Sexting and the law](#)
- [What is consent?](#)
- [Report child abuse or neglect](#)

Knowing about the realities of technology-facilitated sexual violence that youth are facing can help adults to support them. Knowing about young people's rights can help them too.

# Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Youth: Realities

When technology-facilitated sexual violence happens, it can be really disruptive. It can get in the way of many parts of a young person's online life. Technology-facilitated sexual violence can affect a person's "off-line" life as well: for example, youth may deal with the impacts of what's happening online at school, with their friends or classmates.

Technology is "firmly integrated into our relationships with others. This is especially true of youth, who must now navigate and negotiate social interactions in person and across a variety of [online] platforms."<sup>9</sup>

Online harassment can be both hurtful and hard to escape: online aggressors are often anonymous and able to harass without repercussions. As a result, technology-facilitated sexual violence can mean offensive language and threats, harassers that are really persistent, and circumstances that worsen when a youth pushes back against the harassment.<sup>10</sup>

Young people may also worry about what will happen if their parents or other adults find out. While most people who experience sexual violence want to talk about it, they often fear the reactions of others.<sup>11</sup> This can leave youth in a tough situation —where they need help but are afraid to ask for it.

"The whole school had that photo. I didn't want to go to school anymore. People were judging me...I would go hear my name in the hallway: "did you see the picture she sent?"

- Youth survivor, technology-facilitated sexual violence

"We were chatting and they suddenly suggested we send each other suggestive pictures and even though I said no they were still persistent and sent the pictures anyways and then they told me to send pictures as well and when I said no, they lashed out."

-Youth survivor, technology-facilitated sexual violence<sup>12</sup>

"I was scared to tell my parents. I thought they wouldn't believe me, or they would brush it off."

- Youth survivor, technology-facilitated sexual violence

# Different Youth Experience Sexual Violence – and Technology – Differently

While over half of young people agree that the internet is a safe place for them, girls (54%, compared to 61% of boys), 2SLGBTQIA+ youth (45%, compared to 59% of heterosexual youth), and racialized youth (52%, compared to 60% of white youth) are *less likely* to feel that the internet is a safe place.<sup>13</sup>

The way youth feel reflects online realities. Harassment over social media sites targeting Transgender or gender diverse people is common, and is often anonymous, physically and sexually threatening, and transphobic.<sup>14</sup> Sextortion – when someone online threatens to send a sexual image of you to other people if you don't pay them or provide more sexual content – is affecting young men and boys (90% of sextortion victims in Canada are men and boys).<sup>15</sup>

Harmful stereotypes and attitudes lie behind sexually violent and harassing behavior. This creates unsafe online realities for some people more than others. For example:

- Stereotypes and expectations **about gender** suggest that women and girls ought to be passive, accepting, naïve and sexually inexperienced yet flirtatious.<sup>16</sup> Online hate is often directed at women and girls who transgress these stereotypes and expectations. Young women in Canada are more likely than other Internet users aged 15-29 to have experienced both cyberbullying and cyberstalking.<sup>17</sup>
- In Canada, 73% of victims identified in online child sexual offences were **girls** aged 12 to 17.<sup>18</sup>
- Common expectations **about gender identity** are that you are either male or female, and that your sex assigned at birth matches the way you dress, look, and behave, i.e. “like a boy” or “like a girl.” Over 40% of Trans people say that they have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour online, including threats, in the past 12 months. This is well over what cisgender people face (16% experienced unwanted sexual behavior).<sup>19</sup>
- Stereotypes **about race** portray Black people as hypersexualized, and Black youth as less innocent than their white peers.<sup>20</sup> As one gay Black youth shares, race is always present in online encounters: “Whenever they say they want to flirt you...They always put Black before anything. Black hands, Black muscles, things like that. Black bodies.”<sup>21</sup>
- Degrading **cultural and sexual** myths concerning Indigenous people<sup>22</sup> create racist stereotypes and a devaluing of Indigenous people. In Canada, Indigenous activists note that “the most concerning aspect of online hate and threats towards Indigenous women is how often it goes unchallenged”<sup>23</sup> by others.

These harmful stereotypes affect diverse youth in their day to day lives, including online. [MediaSmarts](#), a Canadian organization for digital and media literacy, says that a lot of cyberbullying is motivated by hate: lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and Transgender youth are almost twice as likely to report having been harassed online as those who are straight, while young women are twice as likely to have been sexually harassed online as young men.<sup>24</sup>

These realities have impacts: young people who face online hate or violence are more likely to experience anxiety and depression, and may deal with harassment and violence offline as well.<sup>25</sup>



“I was harassed by a group of cisgender boys on the grounds of being trans. They commented on all of my posts and pictures and messaged me misgendering me, calling me a good girl, etc.”

– Youth survivor, technology facilitated sexual violence<sup>26</sup>

# Tips for Supporting Youth who are Dealing with Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence

## Support young people in recognizing healthy behaviors and abusive behaviors

Relationships are fun and healthy – so encourage them! At the same time, you can check in with young people about the social pressures and expectations they face and help them to deal with these pressures.

Learning about healthy and unhealthy interactions (online and offline) can strengthen a young person’s confidence in getting to know others. Talking about healthy relationships will also remind young people what sort of treatment they are entitled to in a relationship and in online communications. These discussions with youth can occur with family, in schools, youth organizations, and in faith-based and cultural communities.

Talking to youth [about their rights](#) also helps reaffirm how they deserve to be treated by others. [Some great resources are available to help you with these conversations too.](#)

## Check in with young people about their online interactions, experiences, and activities

Check in with a young person if you are worried about their online activity. Be sure to approach things from a place of concern —not anger, shame, or disappointment. For example: “I noticed something on your Instagram page that made me want to talk with you...”

Youth value support and the presence of someone to check in with, but not surveillance. More than half of youth say that they would voluntarily tell a trusted adult in their life about upsetting content they see or receive online; at the same time, youth said that *too many* online controls contributed to a loss of trust between them and the adults in their lives.<sup>27</sup>

“I always ask youth to think about what they want to get out of a social interaction, their feelings and needs behind it: *‘What do you hope to gain by putting this [picture, text, email] out there?’*” – Youth Counsellor

## Encourage youth to trust their instincts online

Remind young people that if they are in touch with someone online or via text and begin to feel anxious, uncomfortable, or confused about the other person’s intentions, it’s okay to step back (or end the communication altogether).

Be sure to name problematic behavior a young person tells you about for what it is, i.e. “This Twitter thread we are following is beginning to sound racist. How did you feel when you read it?”

Or “This DM looks sexually suggestive to me. How do you feel about it?”



## Keep the lines of communications open and avoid victim-blaming

Acknowledge that connecting with others online can be fun and healthy. At the same time, take the initiative and start conversations about technology-facilitated sexual violence. This helps young people to understand that you are comfortable talking about it and can handle it should they need your help. Talk openly about your own online interactions, experiences, and activities. Name problematic things you see online. This increases youth's awareness and their own ability to name violence.

"The most loving parents and friends can get off on the wrong foot by blaming: you shouldn't have...or, next time, you'd better not..., with the best of intentions. They are just trying to keep their kids safe. But in doing this, we are only telling young people to monitor their own behavior...instead of challenging the abusive behavior."

– Youth Counsellor

i'm messaging that boy i like  
– the one that is in my chem  
class!!

great! have fun but if  
something doesn't feel okay  
trust that feeling.

ok. it has been a bit awkward.  
not always sure what to say  
or send. 😊

well i'm here if you have  
questions! and if something  
ever happens that makes you  
feel like upset or uncomfortable  
go to someone you trust.

## Take technology-facilitated sexual violence seriously

If a young person tells you that they are being treated disrespectfully online – or that an online interaction has gone bad – listen and believe them without judgement or blame. Instead, ask about the impacts of what has happened. Ask them how they are feeling and offer to help them think through what to do next.



Be careful not to show your shock or anger. Youth might interpret these as emotions directed at them, not the situation or the offender; it may also lead them to feel shame or guilt, or think they are responsible. Youth who feel this way will be less inclined to open up further, or take important next steps.

If you are a professional that supports young people or that works with youth in the community, talk to youth in ways that are nonjudgmental, collaborative and respectful. Always recognize that youth may have faced violence or other tough things in the past—whether they share this with you or not. Believe what youth tell you about their online experiences, and take their experiences seriously.

"Believing – also not minimizing what's happening. That is what helped me."

– Youth survivor, online sexual violence

"What made me feel a little bit better was hearing that everybody makes mistakes."

– Youth survivor, online sexual violence

## Create safe spaces for youth survivors of technology-facilitated sexual violence

Sexual violence thrives in isolation, silence, and shame. Talking about violence breaks down these barriers and helps prevent further victimization.

Youth who have been victimized want to feel like they're not alone. Making sure that young people remain connected to friends, family, and other people that support them during hard times is really important. This can help youth to heal from the impacts of sexual violence. It also creates space in their life to just be themselves.

## Support anti-oppressive internet practices

Engage in advocacy to make the internet safe for everyone! Reimagining the internet has occurred in a variety of ways, such as efforts to promote [platform regulation](#) and [feminist principles](#) including access, consent, movement building, and more.

"Being called-out online as a slut or whatever...its effect is very isolating. Talk to her about how she is coping and who her community is, her remaining allies. At the least, you can be an ally."

– Youth Counsellor



### Learn more:

Check out this Learning Network and Knowledge Hub Webinar on [Digital Platforms and Violence against Women: User Experiences, Best Practices, and the Law.](#)





## Further resources

### Learn more about technology-facilitated sexual violence and find resources that can help start conversations about it with youth:

[NeedHelpNow.ca](#) provides help for youth who have been negatively impacted by the sharing of their intimate/sexual image or by online harassment. It also has useful information for friends and adults of youth affected by online violence.

[Draw The Line](#) is a bystander intervention campaign that engages Ontarians in an ongoing dialogue about sexual violence, and sexual violence prevention. The campaign challenges common myths about sexual violence, helps foster conversations about sexual violence prevention strategies, and equips bystanders with information on how to intervene effectively. Access Draw the Line resources about technology-facilitated sexual violence under the category Online/Social Media [here](#).

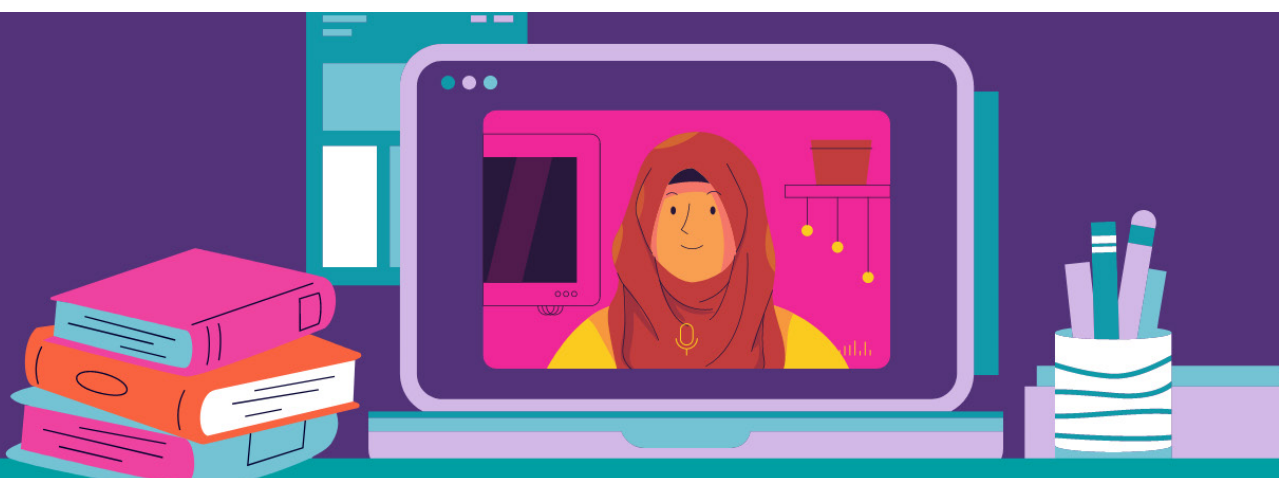
[It Is a BIG Deal](#) provides a video series and an activity book that helps youth in grades 9-12 to learn about relationships and boundaries, sexual consent, dealing with complicated situations, and getting help.

[Egale](#) is Canada's leading organization for 2SLGBTQI people and issues. Egale improves and saves lives through research, education, awareness, and by advocating for human rights and equality. Find Egale's resources on Tackling Anti-2SLGBTQI Cyberbullying in Schools [here](#).

[Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#) is a grassroots network of Indigenous youth and intergenerational relatives that works across issues around reproductive health, rights and justice. [The Sexy Health Carnival \(SHC\)](#) is an Indigenous youth-led project, created by Youth Facilitator, Alexa Lesperance with the help of her community, Naotkamegwaning First Nation. The Carnival is called Sexy because it's about positive self-esteem and feeling good about our bodies, lives, and decisions.

[Cybertip.ca](#) is Canada's tipline for reporting the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children and youth. You can find their resources on technology-facilitated sexual violence [here](#).

[How to be safe online:](#) Easy, non-techy ways to tighten your online security and keep yourself safe from stalkers; and [DIY Online Safety](#). These resources were developed by Chayn. [Chayn](#) is a global nonprofit, run by survivors and allies from around the world, creating resources to support the healing of survivors of gender-based violence. They create open, online resources and services for survivors of abuse that are trauma-informed, intersectional, multi-lingual, and feminist.



## Please evaluate this Issue

Let us know what you think. Your input is important to us. Please complete [this brief survey](#) on your thoughts of this Issue.

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## Endnotes

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