

Young girls groomed ‘within seconds’ of going on to livestreaming websites in ‘sinister’ trend

‘You look at these children, and you almost want to reach into the screen and stop them. What they are doing is so dangerous. It is upsetting and distressing,’ says expert

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Young girls are being groomed “within seconds” of going on to livestreaming websites, a charity has warned.

The Internet Watch Foundation, which removes child abuse imagery from the internet, said men would approach children as young as 11 online.

They then secretly record them exposing themselves before distributing footage on child sex abuse sites. In the worst cases, they also use the footage to blackmail the girls.

Susie Hargreaves, chief executive of the Internet Watch Foundation, told *The Independent* girls were the victims in 92 per cent of all child abuse sexual content they removed.

She said the grooming process can happen very quickly and perpetrators no longer need to build up a relationship with victims or be “particularly skilled”.

She said: “Within seconds they will be asked to expose themselves. Perpetrators will say ‘take your top off’ or ‘Let’s see you naked’. It is scarily easy to get children to do things

online. These children clearly do not realise it is an adult coercing and tricking them into doing things.

“As a woman, and as a parent, you look at these children, and you almost want to reach into the screen and stop them. What they are doing is so dangerous. It is upsetting and distressing. We have seen videos where young girls spell out their name.

“Eleven-year-old girls going through puberty and all sorts of challenges on their own are so much more vulnerable to these types of predators. Just because a child is in their bedroom, it does not necessarily mean they are safe.”

Ms Hargreaves argued the girls are highly vulnerable to exploitation due to not being “emotionally mature” enough to realise what is happening and also being easily flattered by perpetrator’s compliments.

She voiced concerns about the “sinister” nature of the phenomenon and “naivety” of victims – adding they will be unaware that exposing themselves could have consequences for years to come.

The chief executive argued children in bedrooms who have a camera-enabled device and internet access need to be supervised and urged people who see images of child sexual abuse online to report it to her charity.

Sarah Smith, the organisation’s technical projects officer, warned apps that can connect children with strangers are being exploited.

Online grooming is becoming progressively “normalised” and children are exposing themselves online to get “likes” or to acquire popularity, she added.

She said: “The historic idea of grooming being a long-term process has gone. It is more that there is a societal grooming process that takes place, in that these children see this as almost a normalised behaviour.

“It is not a sexual activity for them, but almost part of the trade-off, unfortunately, of getting the popularity on social media and getting to a trend is that, ‘yes, ok, you know, I might have to expose myself to the camera’, which is absolutely heartbreaking.”

Earlier in the month, it emerged a third of child sex abuse images are originally posted online by children themselves amid warnings of a rising phenomenon of minors sharing graphic footage for “likes”.

The Internet Watch Foundation took action on more than 37,000 reports that contained self-generated images and videos from the internet that depicted criminal imagery of under 18s between January and November 2019.

Ms Hargreaves branded this a “national crisis” and noted self-generated content had risen “exponentially year on year” since 2014. Girls will sometimes wrongly think they are sending graphic images or footage to online boyfriends who are duping them, she said.

Police were able to identify a primary school-aged girl in a self-generated image they tracked down due to zooming in on her primary school sweatshirt.

The Internet Watch Foundation previously warned 80 per cent of the sexual selfies it found in its hunt for images of child sexual abuse were of girls aged between 11 and 13.