

Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM): Practice Brief

ARE YOU SEEING AN INCREASE OF CSAM AND TECHNOLOGY RELATED ABUSE AT YOUR CAC/CYAC?

The proliferation of the internet and technology has made it low-risk, profitable, and easier than ever to produce, distribute, and view CSAM.^{1,2}

Additionally, COVID-19 acted as another catalyst for the use and trade of CSAM.³

National and international organizations monitoring trends have called concern over the ongoing increase in numbers and severity of CSAM.

CSAM TRENDS.

- The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) saw an increase from **1 to 2 million reports** a month from **2019 to 2020** and another **35% increase in 2021**.¹²
- The Canadian Centre for Child Protection's (C3P) Cybertip.ca saw a **120% jump in reports** when compared to pre-pandemic reporting numbers.⁸
- **Reports of CSAM under the most severe classifications have more than doubled since 2020.** More CSAM is being classified in severe abuse categories including imagery that involves penetrative sexual activity, and imagery that involves sexual activity with an animal or sadism.^{10,12}
- **The use of AI in the production of CSAM is a growing concern.** This has important implications as the realistic nature of AI and 'deep fakes' makes it even more challenging to detect, identify, and protect real victims of CSAM.¹⁰

Child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) refers to visual depictions (photographic, film, video, other visual representations) of sexually explicit conduct involving children under the age of 18.^{4,5}

We have chosen to use the term CSAM, as an alternative to the legal terminology Child Pornography which is used within the Canadian Criminal Code (s163.1), unless referring specifically to such code. The term 'pornography' is most often associated with consensual, adult content, potentially minimizing the seriousness when a child's abuse is recorded. The term CSAM more accurately accounts for the violence and abuse perpetrated on a child.

Each act of production, possession, and/or distribution of CSAM is a violation of a child's right to dignity, privacy, and protection from harm.

CACS/CYACS ARE WELL POSITIONED TO ADDRESS CSAM.

Across disciplines, service providers note less confidence in identifying and responding to CSAM than other forms of abuse. Service providers also note a need for more training to understand the unique needs of victims and how to respond to disclosures of CSAM.^{7,9,18}

Organizations and governments are calling for a robust multi-disciplinary (MDT) approach to CSAM. CAC/CYAC guidelines include being child-focused, and ensuring a MDT approach. As such, there is a natural fit, with CAC/CYACs being well-suited to address the complex and multi-faceted needs of CSAM victims.¹⁸

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Victims have said that having their abuse recorded and/or distributed has impacted them in uniquely complex ways - with ongoing fear that once these images are online, they are permanent and victims may be recognized at any time, even years after hands-on abuse may have ended. ^{8,19,20}

WHO DOES CSAM IMPACT?

- The majority of CSAM victims are pre-pubescent (12 and under). C3P notes that 78% of CSAM on the internet depicts children under 12 years old, with the majority (63%) depicting children under 8. The IWF noted that CSAM of 11–13-year-olds is decreasing, while there has been a significant increase for victims between 7 and 10 years old. ^{10,11}
- 20% of adolescents encounter unwanted sexual content online. A review of international literature showed that 1/5 young people encounter unwanted sexual content, while 12% experience unwanted sexual solicitation. ¹³
- CSAM has important gendered differences. Girls are consistently victimized at a significantly higher rate than boys. ^{1,8,14}
 - However, CSAM depicting boys are more likely to show more explicit sexual acts and higher levels of violence. ¹¹
 - In addition, The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reports of sextortion have increased more than 8 times from 2022 to 2023. Sextortion is becoming a particularly significant concern for teenage boys. ¹⁰

WHO ARE CSAM OFFENDERS?

CSAM offenders are most often in close relationships with the child or in roles of trust. NCMEC found that 2/3s of victims are abused by someone known to them in their offline communities. Similarly, C3P found that for girls who are victims of CSAM, the perpetrator was most commonly a parent and/or guardian figure; for boys, the perpetrator was most commonly someone within their circle of trust or directly known to them (family friend, relative of parent's friend, neighbour, coach). ^{8,14}

The majority of offenders do not have a previous criminal record. In a recent review of Canadian legal decisions, C3P noted that 60% of offenders did not have a previous criminal record. Further, 55% of offenders had more than one victim. ⁸

CSAM is frequently identified either through online investigations or as part of other investigations. C3P recently found that most CSAM (62%) was detected through online police investigations or other online reports, through systems like cybertip.ca. ⁸

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“There is no other crime type like the possession and distribution of CSAM where consistent re-victimization is inflicted through the commission of new criminal acts” ¹⁵

WORKING WITH VICTIMS OF CSAM?

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES DEVELOPED WITH INPUT FROM VICTIMS

^{16,17}

1

Recognize, validate, and respond to the unique and ongoing trauma experiences. Victims of CSAM have expressed the unique and complex ways that having their abuse recorded impacts their healing. Having images circulating online, knowing people may recognize victims, and having no control over this, all lead to ongoing challenges in healing and processing.

2

Explain the presence of cameras and other recording devices, especially those that are not visible. The use of cameras and technology in interviews may add additional triggers for victims of CSAM. Providing space for victims to ask questions and understand the purpose of cameras is essential in providing trauma-informed care.

3

Establish care or safety plans. These can be helpful for victims of CSAM and their families, especially in preparing for how victims and families will respond should they be recognized or contacted due to the viewing of their abusive materials.

4

Provide support and resources for body image, self-esteem, sexuality, and relationships. Survivors have noted experiencing these challenges, highlighting the importance of service providers being open to discussing and acknowledging these challenges, while providing resources and support.

WHAT INFORMATION ABOUT CSAM WOULD FURTHER SUPPORT YOUR PRACTICE?

WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK

[CLICK HERE TO FILL OUT A SHORT SURVEY](#)

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RESOURCES & TOOLS FOR REPORTING CSAM



Canada's main reporting tool, developed by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection. This tool allows anyone (parents, service providers, young people) to report images that need to be removed from the internet



Linked to Cybertip.ca, this tool is designed specifically for youth who have self-generated images online and need support having those removed from the internet

RESOURCES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE & THEIR FAMILIES



NCMEC has developed resource guides for victims and families to share information and support coping. [Click here to view resources.](#)



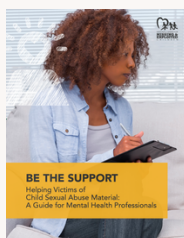
Thorn has developed resources directed at parents to provide education on CSAM as well as practical strategies and discussion guides for talking to children. [Click here to view resources.](#)



Canadian Centre for Child Protection has developed resource guides for parents and young people, addressing different aspects of CSAM. [Click here to view resources.](#)

C3P also has a webpage dedicated to supporting survivors and their families. [Click here to view webpage.](#)

RESOURCES FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS



A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ADDRESSING CSAM



A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT ADDRESSING CSAM

Note: These guides were developed by the American-based National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC); as such, some of the legal information may differ from the Canadian context

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