

More at risk?

Young people who are vulnerable online.

This is part of our evidence for the parliamentary enquiry into cyberbullying and social media.

Briefing notes extracted from the Cybersurvey 2016, showing an analysis of responses from students with SEN, including those with self-reported mental health difficulties in the mainstream sample.

(A separate survey not shown here was created for students in special schools).

All Cybersurvey reports are available online. Research papers are in preparation.



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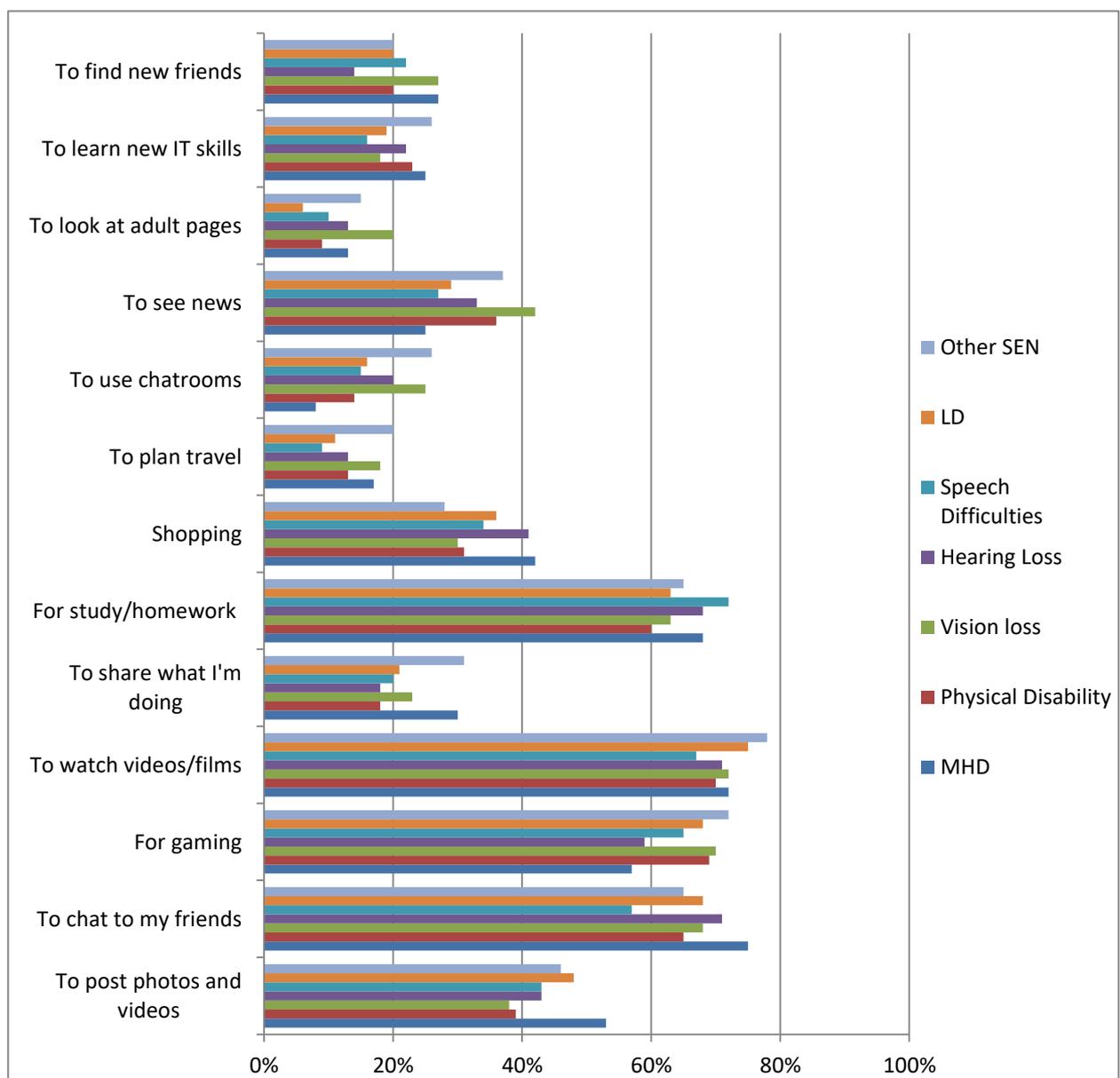
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Charts from the Cybersurvey 2016 Briefing on students with SEN in the mainstream sample.

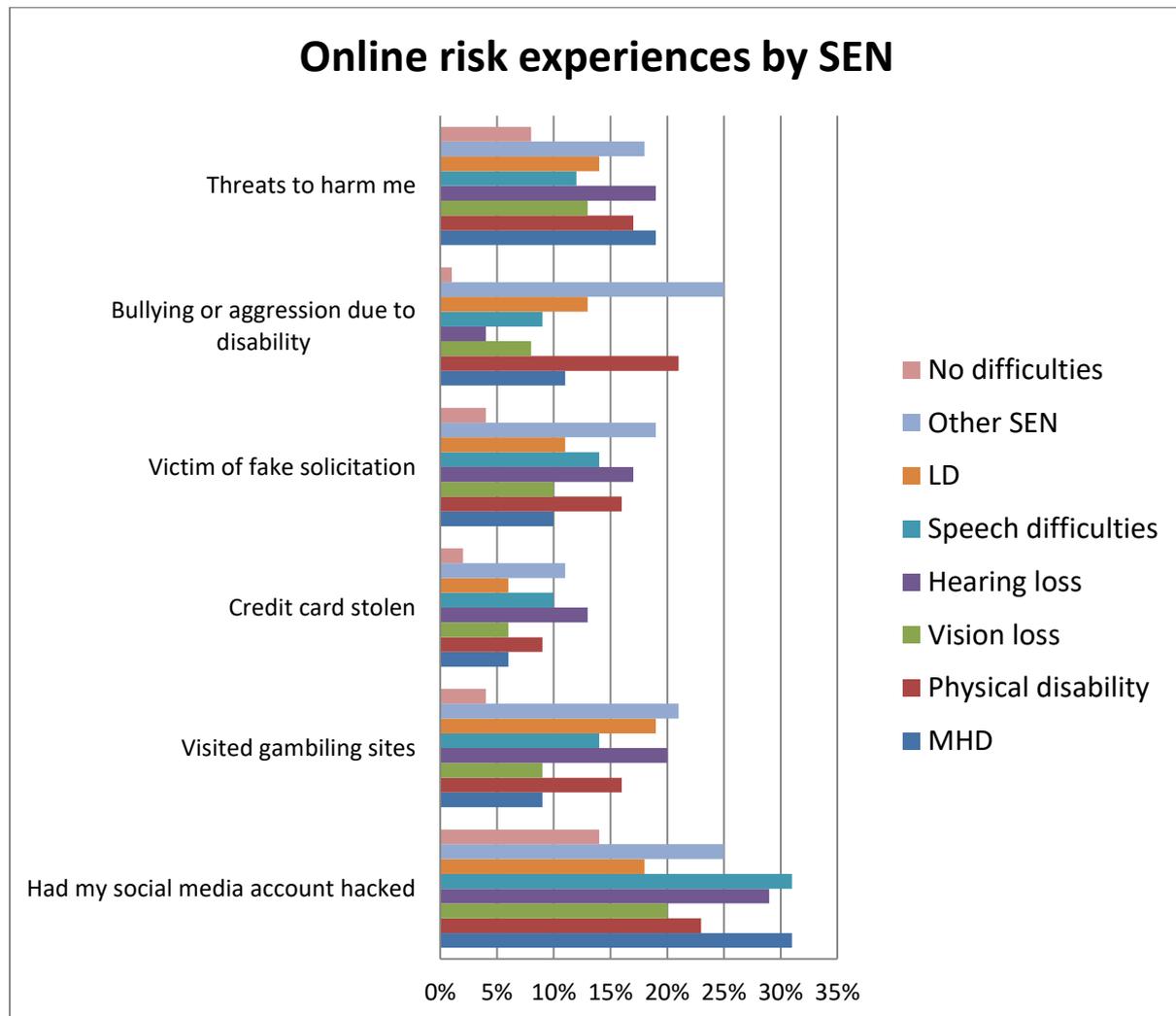
What do you go online to do? By group.

Data was collected in the autumn of 2016. A sample of students with SEN was selected out of the mainstream sample of 3142 students. 60 have mental health difficulties (MHD); 188 have learning difficulties (LD); 89 have speech difficulties; 88 have physical difficulties; 60 cannot see very well or at all, 76 have hearing loss and 65 have other special needs. It was found that many students had multiple difficulties or adversities. They have rich online lives. Compared to others, young people with a self-reported mental health difficulty are more likely than most to say they go online to:

Find new friends; Learn new IT skills; shop; study; share what I'm doing; post videos and photos and chat to my friends. While these activities are not in themselves necessarily dangerous it is the fact that some young people over share, or seek new friends who spot their vulnerability and exploit this that is of concern. They are oversharing photos and videos compared to the sample and to these vulnerable groups.



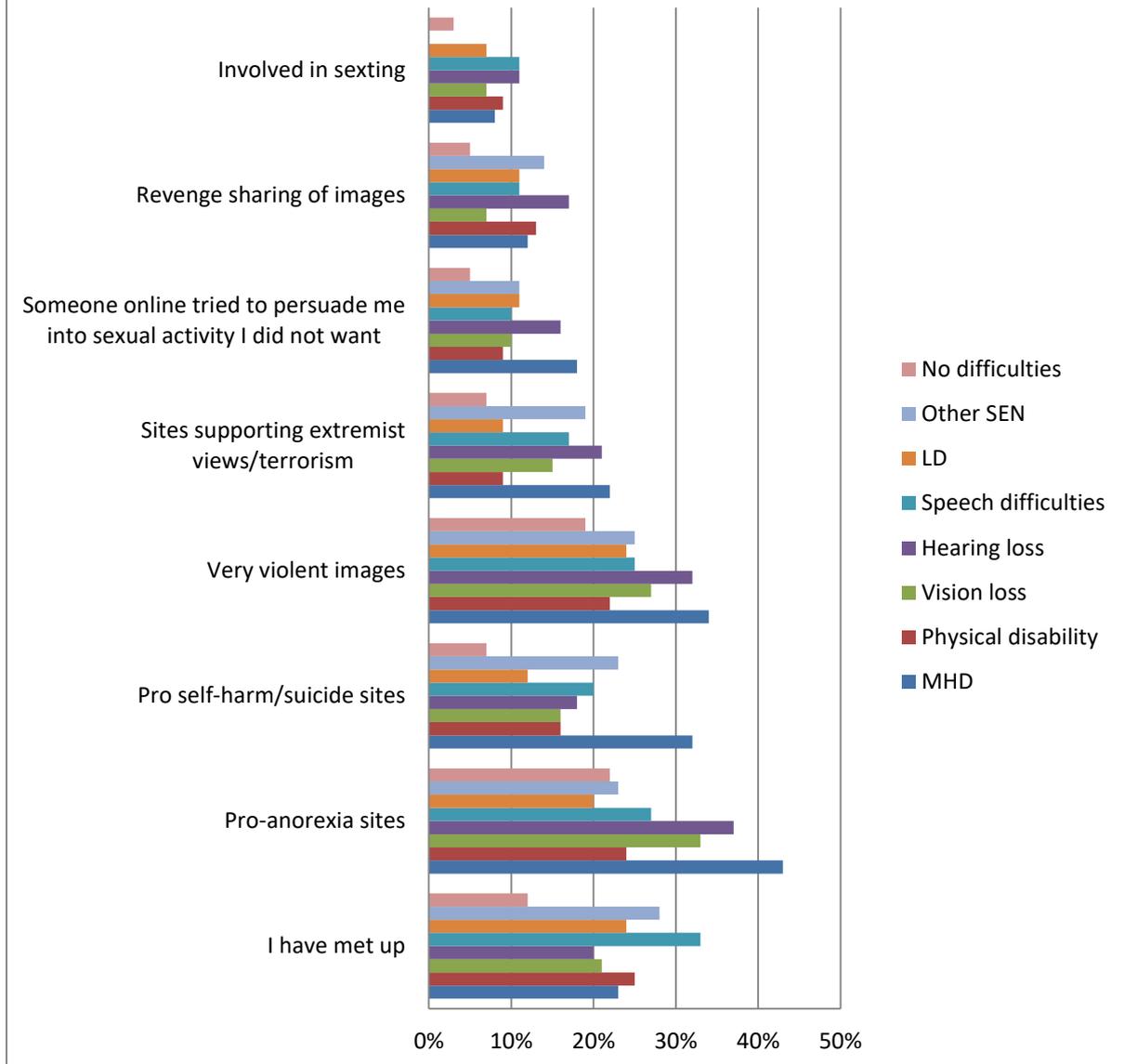
Online experiences by those students with special needs.



Young people with mental health difficulties are most likely to have had their social media account hacked. This turns out to be a signal that other problems are likely to be present. They are among those reporting high levels of online threats to harm them. Those with other SEN among whom are people on the Autistic spectrum, show very high levels of bullying or aggression towards them which they put down to their difficulty or disability. Their social media may be hacked. They tend to visit gambling sites and are receiving high levels of threats to harm them. They are most likely to be a victim of fake solicitation, when the person who appears interested in them turns out not to be who they purported to be.

We note in 2016 a concern about students with hearing loss, as they emerge for the first time in our surveys as a group at risk. They are avid online shoppers but report credit card problems hacking and theft. They also report arranging to meet up with someone known only online and being involved in a lot of sexting. (Not shown here).

Online experiences by Sen 2

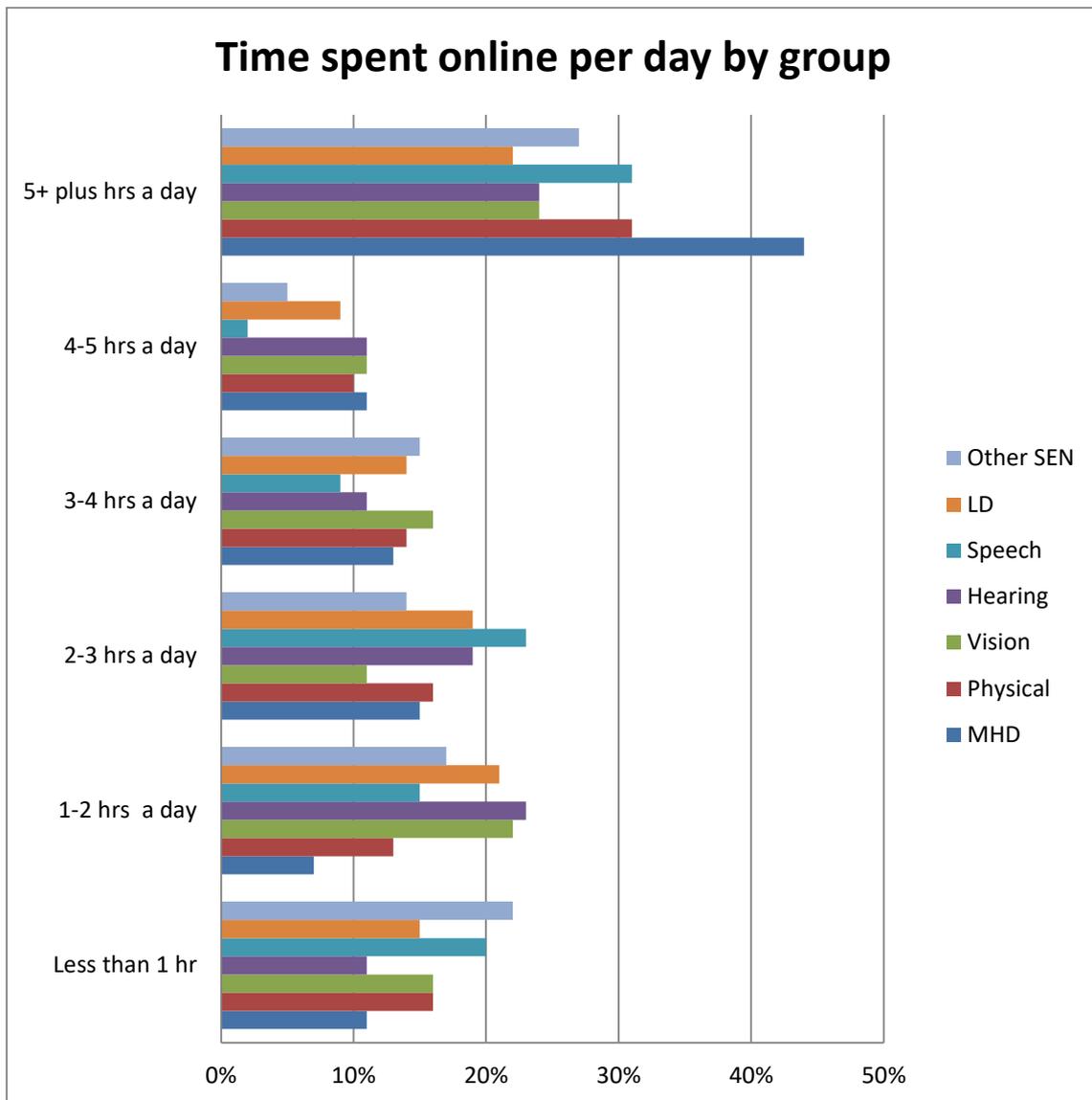


Young people with mental health difficulties are markedly more likely to visit pro anorexia sites and view very violent images, they are also more likely than peers to say someone online had tried to persuade them into sexual activity they did not want. They are also more likely to say they have seen sites support extremist views or supporting terrorism. Worryingly they can be seen reporting visits to sites promoting self-harm and suicide.

*Those with speech difficulties show a high score for meeting up with someone they met online however it appears that many of these meetups were with a group of children with similar difficulties or a common interest and these could be safe meetings of groups that are enjoyable and supportive. Most told a parent and were often taken to the meet up by a parent.

*Young people with mental health difficulties show a high overall score for online risk in a research paper we are currently preparing. However this factor does not necessarily act alone, problems with family or relationships, communication difficulties, being a victim of cyberaggression and possibly having some physical disability and the age of the student appear to contribute towards high online risk scores. El Asam, A and Katz, A. In preparation.

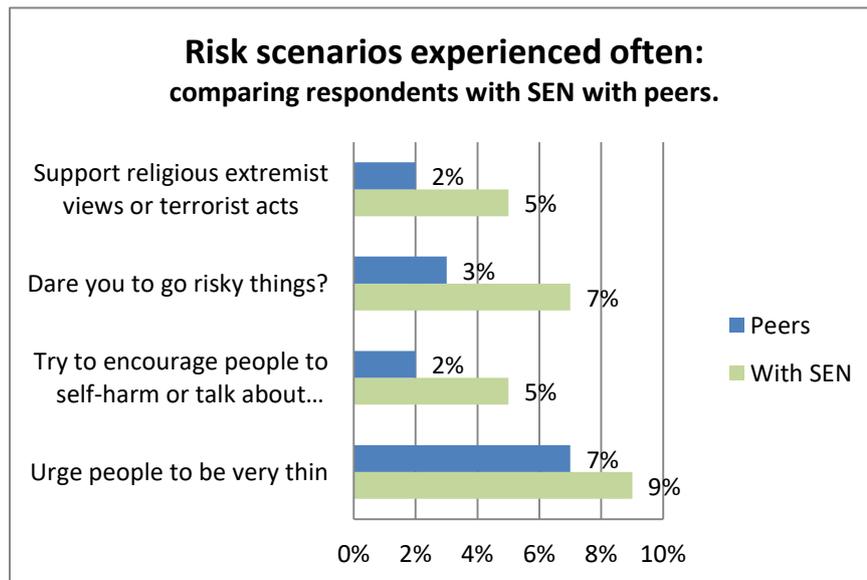
Time spent online per day



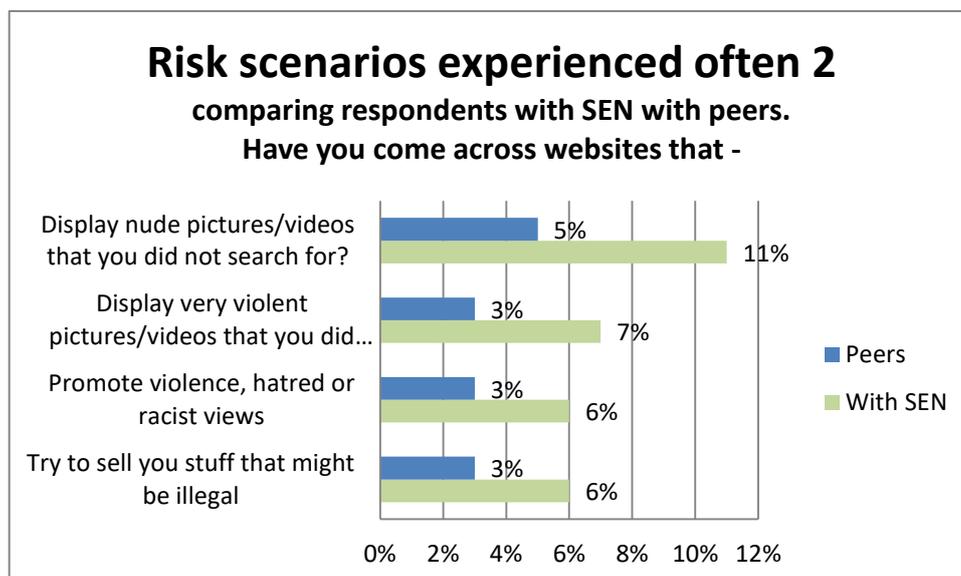
It is evident that more students with a mental health difficulty report spending 5 or more hours per day online when compared to their peers in the SEN sample. Those with speech difficulties or other forms of SEN (including those on the Autistic spectrum) are also more likely to spend more than five hours a day online.

Risk scenarios – SEN groups compared to peers.

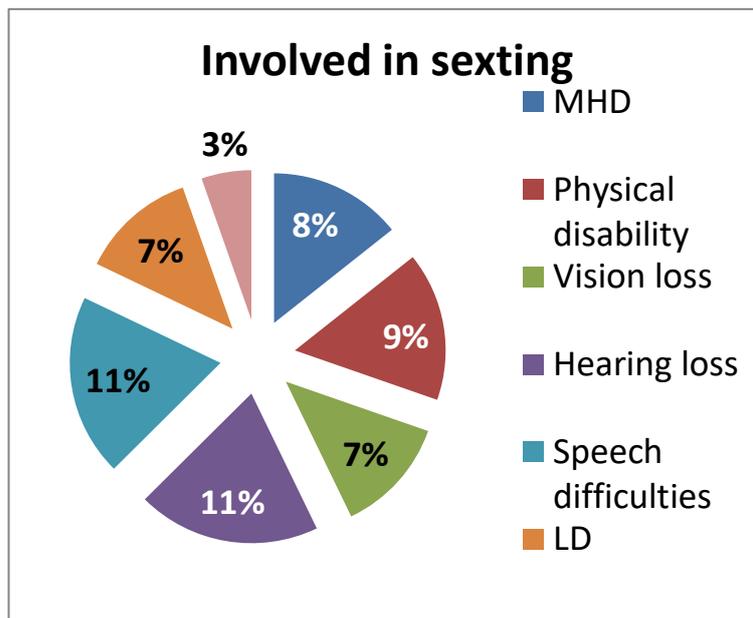
In the charts below we compare those selected for study due to special needs, with answers from their peers who have no difficulties. Students were asked whether they had come across sites like this ‘once or twice’ or ‘often’. This chart and the one below, illustrate those who are seeing this content ‘often’. It is likely that people who choose ‘often’ are returning to these sites out of choice rather than coming across it once by chance, or out of curiosity. However it should be borne in mind that many more young people admit to seeing this type of high risk content once or twice. Members of the SEN sample are twice as likely to see sites with extremist content, sites daring you to do high risk things, sites encouraging self-harm or suicide.



Members of the SEN sample are more than twice as likely as their peers to view (come across) websites that display nude pictures or videos that they did not search for. Equally they are more likely to say they have come across sites displaying violence or promoting hatred, racist views or violence and trying to sell illegal goods. Thus the risks facing them are wider than social media, they consist of a basket of risks which we have studied in the categories of Contact, Conduct, Content and Cyberscams.

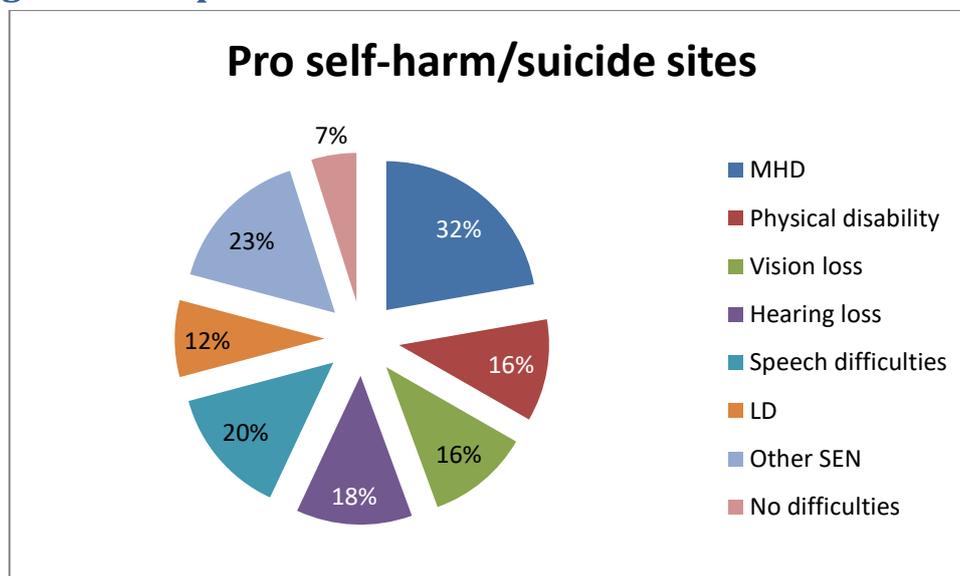


Involved in sexting



Those with communication difficulties i.e. hearing or speech require support and help regarding sexting. Compared to peers with no difficulties (3%) they are more than three times as likely to be sexting.

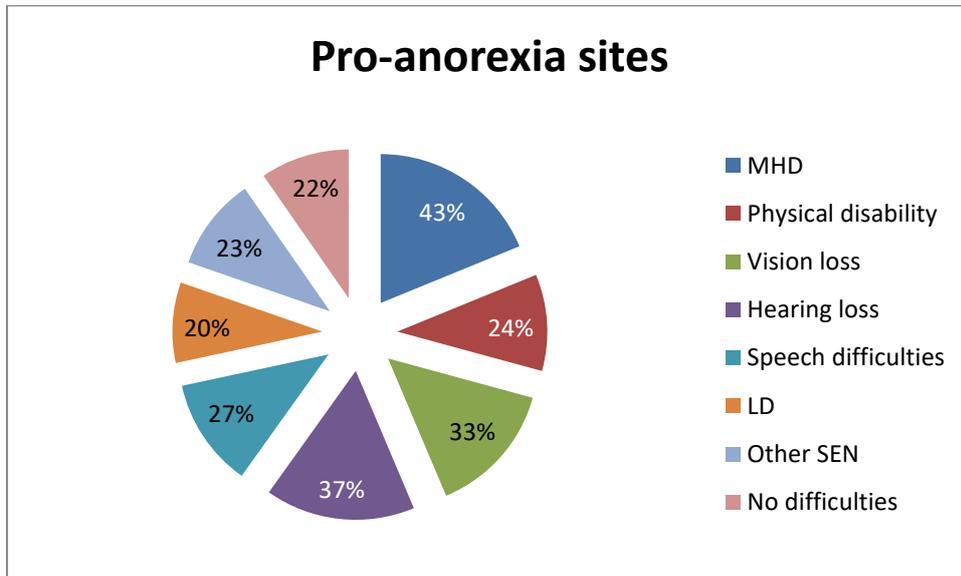
Visiting sites that promote self-harm or suicide



It is not unexpected but extremely worrying that young people with mental health difficulties are the group most likely to be visiting websites that promote self-harm and or suicide. The disparity in their reports is notable – they are more than four and a half times more likely than peers with no difficulties to be seeking out this type of site. The support and help they require is complex and sensitive but of the utmost urgency.

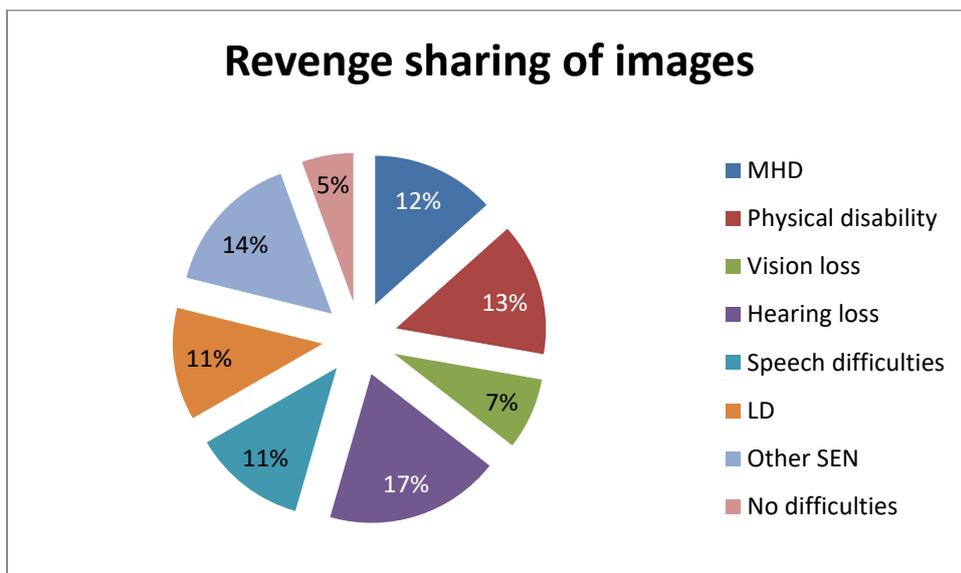
*In a recent evaluation of service responses we found that many agencies were not well prepared to address their clients' online lives. This included services for mental health for adolescents. Training was not specialised enough, assessments were inadequate and data was not kept rendering evaluation impossible.

Visiting pro-anorexia sites



Students with mental health difficulties can be seen here to be visiting sites promoting anorexia. They are almost twice as likely to do so as their counterparts with no difficulties. It is concerning that any teenagers are visiting these sites in such large numbers but especially those with mental health concerns, those with hearing loss and those with some loss of vision who appear to be more drawn to these sites.

Revenge sharing of images



Being a victim of revenge sharing can be extremely distressing and humiliating, especially when other schoolmates pick up on this and jointly victimise the victim further. The practice of 'slut shaming' in our schools is partly to blame for the intense and widespread attacks on someone who suffers in this way. Here we see the students with hearing loss require help.

Cyberbullying

12 people said they had cyberbullied other people and 27 thought 'maybe' they had done so. 95 out of 385 people in this SEN sample said they had been cyberbullied, this is a rate of 29% compared to 19% in the total mainstream sample. They are a third more likely to be cyberbullied than their peers. Within the sample, the following groups reported high levels of cyberbullying:

46% of those with MHD were cyberbullied; 32% of those with a physical disability; 45% of those who cannot see very well if at all; 40% of those with hearing impairments; 25% of those with speech difficulties; 30% of those with learning difficulties and 36% of those with other special educational needs. But of those who experienced cyberbullying, 23 told nobody. 42 people did tell someone about it and 23 reported it online.

If you told someone, who did you tell?

I told my friends and we had a laugh about it as I don't take it seriously

My best friend because I can rely on her and my mum

My parents and they told her parents

My sister

No because it was my parents bullying me

A trusted adult

I told my girlfriend and she stopped it

I told mum and she told the school

I told my teacher and she did nothing

I told my friend

I told everybody necessary

I told my boyfriend

My family and friends although my friends could already view it

Police

I told my mum because she was the only person I could talk to

A person I trust

My bff

Question text

Below is text on which we based our answers to the online questions. It is reproduced here because the references can be shown which was not possible online.

1. Research shows how being victimised in childhood can have adverse effects on health and wellbeing, relationships and work life, well into adulthood. (Wolke and Lereya, 2015ⁱ; Arseneault et al., 2008ⁱⁱ; Copeland et al., 2013ⁱⁱⁱ) These effects are also likely when victimisation occurs online. In cases involving young people, offline and online victimisation often coexist. Some argue that being cyberbullied has more severe consequences than offline bullying due to the greater audience and the 24/7 nature of it, plus the possibility of anonymity (Sticca and Perren, 2013^{iv}; von Marees and Peterman, 2012^v) and the disinhibition effect of the online space (Suler, 2004^{vi}). Greater humiliation is possible along with social isolation.

Victims are often multiply and repeatedly victimised. (Finkelhor et al., 2007^{vii} described this as Polyvictimisation) a minority of children experiencing victimisation of many types from different sources, possibly including abuse at home. These vulnerable children are likely to be cyberbullied, display aggression, may be sexting, talking to unknown people online and also look at high risk content online. It is therefore difficult to unravel the effects of one form of victimisation only, when we know that there are many other impacts on the child who may be living with adversities and vulnerabilities (Fisher et al., 2015^{viii}). The Schools Health Education Unit 2014 suggested impacts from cyberbullying and the economic downturn were to blame for a drop in girls' self-esteem; El Asam and Katz (in preparation) explored other vulnerabilities co-existing with being cyberbullied such as visiting websites with high risk content or having contact experiences online that are high risk or manipulative).

Copeland et al. (2013) showed that what they call pure victims, (those who did not bully others) were at higher risk for depression, anxiety, panic attacks and agoraphobia than children who were not involved in bullying. Worst off were the bully/victims, who were at higher risk of depressive and anxiety disorders.

A relationship has been seen between being cyberbullied and the likelihood of experiencing other forms of high risk situations online. This suggests that if a young person reports being cyberbullied, the response should look wider than dealing only with the reason for the immediate report. In the Cybersurvey: compared to non-victims, victims of cyberbullying are more likely to say that they have experienced images shared in revenge by a former friend or ex-partner. They report seeing more online racism and are 4 x more likely to say 'the internet caused difficulties with my friends' and 3 x more likely to report difficulties caused with my family as a result of the Internet. They are 2 x as likely to say 'the Internet affected my schoolwork' and more than 2 x as likely to say 'the internet left me with upsetting

thoughts and feelings'; 'edgy and nervous'. They are 3 x more likely to say 'the Internet left me feeling depressed'. In addition victims of cyberbullying were 2 x more likely to go online 'to make new friends'. While the latter can be supportive it can also be high risk (Suffolk Cybersurvey, 2016^{ix}).

Not all risks result in harm and harms do not affect all young people in the same way. Being cyberbullied when other adversities are already present can increase the likelihood of the victim encountering potential harm in four categories of risk including manipulative relationships sexting (contact), high risk content such as suicide sites, cyberscams and conduct (El Asam & Katz, in preparation^x). Gorzig (2016^{xi}) found links between all cyberbullying roles and viewing suicide-related web content to be independent of psychological problems.

The impacts of Cyberbullying should not be considered in isolation but a picture built up of the individual's life and general confidence, happiness, safety and relationships. This can provide insights into the form of support needed. It is not known whether being cyberbullied causes mental health difficulties where they were not present or whether young people who are already showing mental health or emotional difficulties are more prone to being cyberbullied and experiencing high risk situations online, and more likely to be affected by them. There is much discussion about this and claims of cause and effect are increasingly questioned. Because there is evidence of a relationship between being cyberbullied and being depressed, this should be used as a basis to develop an approach to support people. Jean Twenge in The Atlantic, argued forcefully that smartphones were the cause of mental ill health among teens.^{xii} Some academics immediately critiqued the implication that correlations suggest a cause and effect relationship (Lisa Guernsey, The Slate).^{xiii} Livingstone (2017^{xiv}) has recently written 'No the Internet is not actually stealing kids' innocence' in a blog rebutting claims that all kids are looking at porn. She has written blogs including 'If we can't prove the internet makes children unhappy, we shouldn't lay the blame at its door'. There is a growing pushback at facile media panics which can drive policy and parental responses when they are not nuanced or explanatory.

2. Certain young people are more vulnerable online generally and report high levels of cyberbullying. They are more likely to suffer effects on their mental health and emotional wellbeing if they have an adverse experience. Prior to adverse incidents some young people already experience depression or 'feel I am not good enough most of the time'. Those with no confidence, those who are depressed or with mental health difficulties are significantly more likely to be experiencing multiple high risk scenarios and engage in conduct that is also high risk. They are highly likely to be a cyberbullying victim and the latter are in turn, twice as likely to be a victim of revenge sharing of intimate images compared to those who are not cyberbullied.

In the Cybersurvey: compared to non-victims, cyberbullying victims are more likely to say they have suffered revenge sharing of images by a former friend or ex-partner. They see more online racism and are 4 x more likely to say 'the internet caused difficulties with my friends' and 3 x more likely to report difficulties caused with my family as a result of the Internet. They are 2 x as likely to say 'the Internet affected my schoolwork' and more than 2 x as likely to say 'the internet left me with upsetting thoughts and feelings'; 'edgy and nervous'. They are 3 x more likely to say 'the Internet left me feeling depressed'. In addition victims of cyberbullying were 2 x more likely to go online 'to make new friends'. While the latter can be supportive it can also be high risk (Suffolk Cybersurvey, 2016^{xv}).

Offline adversities have been shown to impact online life although it cannot be assumed that those who are vulnerable offline are the only groups who might be vulnerable online or that their offline vulnerability will transfer online (Munro, 2011^{xvi}). We found in a study of vulnerability that LAC; young carers and those with experience of both caring and being in care, were significantly more vulnerable than their peers. Those who had a dual experience i.e. periods in care and at other times being a carer, were more vulnerable online than either LAC and carers. (El Asam, A and Katz, A in preparation)^{xvii}.

Compared to 15% of people with no difficulties, higher rates of cyberbullying are seen among people who: never feel happy and confident 49%; those who feel depressed (43%); have a mental health difficulty (42%); children in care (33%); those who prefer not to state their gender (27%); those with hearing loss (40%); and young carers (23%). Being cyberbullied is likely to exacerbate these feelings. Girls are more likely to report being cyberbullied (23%). It is important to state that children move in and out of vulnerability and that adversities can intersect in one individual i.e. a young person in care may also have some learning difficulties and lack confidence or feel depressed.

When a young person presents with a cyberbullying incident it is not likely to be successfully resolved unless other aspects of their emotional life and their online life are considered. This is because the motivation that could lead them to the high risk content our research has identified remains unchanged. This incident may conceal several other more serious harms that should not be overlooked such as sharing self-generated images with someone online or being coerced or manipulated into behaviour by someone else; looking at pro anorexia websites; pro self-harm or even suicide sites. Care managers and mental health professionals are urged to look into the young person's online life rather than only the issue being reported.

7. Young people in care may try to contact their family of origin despite court orders or advice from social workers. This can be high risk. Social media facilitates being found – this is mostly a positive feature but in the case of children who have been separated from family by the courts this can be a problem.

Many young people have two accounts on a social media platform to hide conversations on one of them and the other to be viewed by parents or carers.

Very vulnerable young people are likely to be harmed by cruel social interaction whether it is online or offline. But there are certain crimes that are internet enabled or dependent. Social media companies should be alert to these risks when assessing reports of a problem.

The emphasis in this question overlooks the fact that today it is possible to communicate via so many other channels such as through internet connected gaming or apps. Therefore it is not likely that social media could 'police' communications as young people would simply move to another mode of communication as we already see. It was via gaming that Brek Bednar was befriended by his eventual murderer. Other forms of messaging exist and young people are using Whatsapp and Skype intensely.

Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney (2017^{xviii}) show how Instagram is being used by drug dealers to lure young people into their world through images of 'bling' and cars for example. Young people are lured into what they believe will be a route to success and consumer desirables, only to find they are trapped in violence and danger.

While social media can create a supportive network and a community, it can also leave a young person feeling isolated and ostracised, feeling they are not having the 'wonderful life' portrayed in friends' accounts. They may not be mature enough to understand how curated these images actually are. They may measure their own life or body image against those of others. However the latter is equally true of magazines, adverts and TV content. Researchers have described the 'mixed maturity' found among foster children, who may be sexually mature and 'emotionally stunted'. They were observed tending to seek attention online, putting themselves at greater risk (Badillo-Urquioa, and Wisniewski, 2017^{xix}). Our own research showed a hierarchy of risk within a selected group of vulnerable young people. Those who were young carers were at risk more than their peers but less at risk than children in care. Those most at risk were children and young people with experiences of periods in care as well as periods acting as a carer (El Asam and Katz, in preparation^{xx}).

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