

# Sharing Sexual Imagery Online: A Carers Story

*“...it was not just a phone, it was a gateway to a world few parents understand...”*

Lizzie is 14 years old and has been living with us in a settled and loving foster placement for 7 years. She is very caring, well behaved and academically bright and an important part of our family. We are proud of her and as part of the transition from primary school to secondary we bought her a smart phone. As Lizzie's carers we recognised the importance of internet safety so had set the phone up enabling us to access and see all her Facebook messages on the family's computer and regularly monitored her texts.

During a routine check in October of Year 8 we were shocked to discover texts from a boy asking Lizzie to send him naked pictures of her. It transpired this text exchange had been going on for weeks with Lizzie resisting and messages being deleted. However, at a particular low moment for Lizzie following a negative contact with her birth family she sent some naked pictures to the boy. After all this was uncovered the school and police were involved and all Lizzie's social media accounts were deleted and apps removed from her phone and Lizzie was instructed not to delete messages again. She agreed and appeared to comply with these instructions.

During the following months Lizzie seemed to spend a lot of time in her room, as there was no access to social media it just seemed to us that she was enjoying her own company and was a bit embarrassed about the pictures.

One day I was walking behind Lizzie and noticed she was on Snapchat. Despite the rules we had put in place she had set up a new account and downloaded the app on her phone. We had no idea that each time she finished she would delete the app on her phone so it could not be seen when we checked it. Lizzie is a very pretty girl, but also a lonely child and following some investigation into her social media use we found that she was regularly provoked to post sexualised images of herself on various social media sites and appeared to be enjoying the response from her peers. Lizzie got literally hundreds of flirtatious, sexual comments from boys. There were hundreds of girl and boy contacts, some she did not know, acting in a similar way posting similar pictures and having very explicit conversations. They call it 'sexting' and Lizzie says, "all kids do it".

Not only is it illegal to create and share naked or sexualised photos and videos of under-18s, we as parents recognise the dangers and coincidentally whilst we were

examining the phone, Lizzie received several videos and pictures of adult male genitals with request to meet her. Several of the apps Lizzie used made it possible for her contacts to see where she was and this left an already vulnerable child potentially at more serious risk. In some of the pictures she took in her bedroom you could see her school blazer and tie, and school books with the name of the school.

We have now realised that when we gave Lizzie the smart phone, it was not just a phone it was a gateway to a world few parents understand with opportunities to meet and share the most intimate details and images with complete strangers from a child's bedroom where they think they are safe.

For Lizzie we were lucky to be able to recognise the dangers and intervene. In total 15 different social media apps were removed from her phone. We were able to use the settings in her phone to restrict access to the internet and apps using a PIN code. We have kept talking about the dangers to Lizzie and implemented tight restrictions. She is now doing well and appears to have matured so she better understands some of the risk. She has now been allowed access to Facebook which we can monitor easily and she also has YouTube and iMessage, all of which give her access to what she needs socially but now we can keep her safe. If she wants to go on the internet she uses the home laptop in the living room like everyone else.

I hope this story helps other carers and parents to realise the dangers. We thought it wouldn't happen to our Lizzie. My advice would be to always keep a close eye on what your children are looking at and doing online and talk to them about the risks and how to stay safe.

There is lots of information to support parents and carers about how to support your child to stay safe online. Please look at this BEFORE your child has a problem don't wait until it is too late.

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## **REPORT CONCERNS**

You can report online abuse through the [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre \(CEOP\) website](#) or the [Internet Watch Foundation](#). Or report anonymously to Crimestoppers 0800 555111.

If you are concerned about a child in Essex, call Children & Families Hub (Social Care): 0345 603 7627 or 0845 606 1212 (out of hours). **If a child is in immediate danger, dial 999 and ask to speak to police.**