Online child abuse material: Q & A

1. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY 'CHILD ABUSE MATERIAL'?

Child abuse material (CAM) is the term used to refer to the photos or videos taken by an offender, documenting the sexual abuse of a child.

2. IS 'CAM' THE SAME AS 'CHILD PORN'?

The media often use the term 'child pornography'. This is not appropriate when describing images of sexual abuse of children. A sexual image of a child is 'abuse' or 'exploitation' and should never be described as 'pornography'.

Pornography is a term used for adults engaging in consensual sexual acts distributed (mostly) legally to the general public for their sexual pleasure. Child abuse images are not. They involve children who cannot and would not consent and who are victims of a crime.

3. WHAT'S THE CONNECTION WITH THE INTERNET?

The spread of the Internet and technology has led to a huge rise in the distribution of images of child abuse material. Offenders can access, share and trade child abuse material more easily – images can be taken and uploaded in one country and made available to anyone in the world – and offenders can have direct contact with children.

4. WHAT IS INTERPOL DOING ABOUT IT?

We work to remove child abuse material from view, to identify the victims, and locate and arrest the offenders. The identification of the young victims is a top priority for law enforcement, as it can also help identify the perpetrators.

Central to our efforts is the International Child Sexual Exploitation image database (ICSE DB).

We also offer logistical support and assistance for international law enforcement operations, including training sessions, intelligence, briefings, analysis and technical advice.

5. WHAT IS THE ICSE DATABASE?

ICSE is the International Child Sexual Exploitation image database. Available to specialized investigators in our member countries, it uses sophisticated image comparison software to make connections between victims and places.

Investigations often have an international dimension, requiring input from multiple countries across different continents. The ICSE database allows investigators to upload material from their national databases, to compare against international records. They analyse all data that can be drawn from the images in order to amass clues, identify any overlap in cases, and combine their efforts.

The ICSE platform also provides a forum for police to request immediate checking of information and therefore enabling swift action.

Currently, 49 countries are connected to the ICSE database, plus Europol (the European Union's law enforcement agency).

6. IS THE DATABASE SUCCESSFUL?

Yes. As of 1 January 2017, more than 10,000 victims had been identified through the database and removed from harm.

More than 4,700 offenders had also been identified. Given that the images recorded in the ICSE database form solid evidence, police and judiciary are able to build strong cases for prosecution.

The database has evolved significantly since its inception in 2001 (when it was known as ICAID), and continues to be developed in line with new technology and demand from investigators. A third version will soon be released which will include innovative technologies such as video analysis and camera identification. Planning has also started for version 4 of the product, which will be known as I-CARE.

Funding for the database is provided by the European Commission.

7. HOW DO I PROTECT MY CHILDREN ONLINE?

Talk to your children regularly about what they're doing online and encourage safe habits. Install parental control software and keep it up-to-date.

It's important for children to be aware of the guidelines below, but they are relevant for adults too!
- Stay in control of your information and actions.
- In social networks there is a privacy setting – use it!
- Don't post your full name, date of birth, address or school.
- Think about what messages and information you post online – if you're afraid someone will read it then don't post it.
- You can't "unsay" what you say online, so think before you write.
- If you're not comfortable talking to someone, don't reply.
- Use the 'print screen' function to record any content that you don't feel comfortable with, and show it to someone you trust. You can also report it – either online at www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com or to the police.
- Don't take anything for granted. Is your online friend who you think they are?
- Children should never arrange to meet a 'virtual' friend in real life without discussing it with an adult first. If you do agree to meet an 'online' friend 'offline', you should take necessary safety precautions, whatever your age. For instance, let people know where you're going or take someone with you.

Remember, all the advice above applies to any device connected to the Internet: laptop computer, mobile phone, tablet, and so on.

'The underwear rule' from the Council of Europe provides advice in a way that can be understood by young children. www.underwearrule.org

8. HOW DO I REPORT MATERIAL THAT I HAVE SEEN ONLINE?

If you have seen any content you don't feel comfortable with, you can report it – either online at www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com or to the police.

Many countries have a national reporting system. For example, CEOP in the UK: www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/