

Closing The Net – Episode 4, Offensive Behaviour

Disclaimer:

Due to themes of child sexual abuse and exploitation, the content of this podcast may be distressing to some people. It is not suitable for children, and listener discretion is advised. For advice and support, please visit ACCCE.gov.au.

Brendan Hayler:

Sextortion is the word that we use to describe people who are obtaining sexualised images while extorting that person or using threats to coerce them to provide that material. I think sextortion occurs across the spectrum, but we obviously, in child protection, are focused on the sextortion of children.

Jon Rouse:

This is an escalating global issue. We are still seeing sex offenders abuse children, but we are increasingly seeing children essentially sexually abused themselves.

Paula Hudson:

People just do not believe you and then don't want to see the imagery to be shown. You don't want to put them in that position, but it's a very difficult conversation to have once it has taken place. It's something that can't be undone.

Grant Stevens:

What they do is a despicable act, and that notwithstanding the challenges we face in running those investigations. We are 100% resolved to following up all information that we can access and prosecuting anyone we can identify.

Paul Hopkins:

In my opinion, these people are the weakest of the weak because they're abusing and using force against defenseless children. I've always hated bullies. That was one of the reasons why I joined the federal police. Pedophiles are amongst the worst bullies in the world.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

I'm Rodger Corser. And this is Closing the Net, a podcast series that explores the world of those policing online child sexual exploitation, the men and women who work tirelessly to eradicate this borderless crime. From the women and men who dedicate their lives to ending this crime type to those working tirelessly to provide knowledge, tools, and resources that will help keep our kids safe online, these are their stories. In this episode, we talk to global experts to try and understand what motivates an online child sex offender and how law enforcement is using that information to help protect our kids. And later, a father takes us through what can only be described as any parent's worst nightmare.

Peter:

It was about 9:00 at night or 8:00 at night, and he said he had to go to his room urgently. He picked his phone up. I said, "No. Well, you leave your phone here." And he goes, "No, I need my phone." I'm like, "What for?" And he just started shaking.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Some of the stories you'll hear in this episode may be confronting. But they're stories that need to be told, stories that need to be talked about by parents, carers, teachers, by people, such as you and I.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The sexual abuse of a child is something that is simply unimaginable. Yet, last year alone, the ACCCE received more than 21,000 reports of online child sexual exploitation. 21,000! And that's just Australia.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

That anyone would want to inflict harm on an innocent child, let alone sexual harm or abuse, is something that's incredibly difficult for most of us to comprehend. So just who are these people who want to target children and abuse them in this way? What motivates them to act on their disturbing thoughts, and how can we as everyday members of the community identify them? These are not easy questions to answer. In much the same way that there's not just one type of victim, there's not just one type of offender.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The ACCCE is working closely with the AIC, the Australian Institute of Criminology, to try and understand what makes these individuals tick. Sarah Napier is part of the AICs research team, which analyzes different areas of child sexual abuse material and online offending.

Sarah Napier:

In terms of looking at the profile of people who view and share child sexual abuse material online, when we're looking at the majority of cases that involved an arrest, you're looking at a white male, typically aged 35 to 45 years old, well-educated and with stable employment, but lacking in certain areas like intimate and other relationships, lacking in social skills and interactions, and also lacking in self-esteem. Now, in saying that, there isn't really one profile that fits all. We do see a lot of people from various different backgrounds and ages viewing this type of material. But that's just the typical profile that we see in the arrest stats.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

But a typical profile in the arrest stats doesn't mean there's such a thing as a typical offender. In recent years, the AFP has been seeing more and more online child sex offenders of a younger age. Something which Sarah Napier says could have a connection with access to pornography.

Sarah Napier:

In terms of increasing the likelihood that someone's going to view this material or share this material if you're viewing adult pornography at a high frequency, you're much more likely to view child sexual abuse material. If you're viewing other deviant forms of pornography, for example, if you're viewing Bestiality pornography, you're much more likely to view child sexual abuse material. If you contact sexual offending against children, not surprisingly, you're also more likely to view this child sexual abuse material. Now, in saying that, it doesn't mean that everyone who has these characteristics is going to view this material. But if you do have these characteristics, you're more likely to go on to view this material.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Dr. Rick Brown is deputy director of the AIC. Their research suggests that people viewing or sharing child sexual abuse material are often learning their offensive behaviors on the run, including learning more about the sophisticated techniques they can use to access material and hide their identity.

Rick Brown:

Most people that get into this kind of viewing and subsequent sharing of material will start off in a very amateur way. They'll escalate from there as they learn from other offenders in forums and chat rooms. They'll learn how to access different parts of the web, where that material can be found. Most of us wouldn't know where to go looking. But by learning from others, now they learn how peer-to-peer networks operate, how to access image sharing and file sharing sites where this material is accessed. Ultimately, move on to that more serious material that's available on the darknet. That's an area where learned behavior is really important because it's not easy. You need to learn how to create anonymity before you move on to using TOR so that you don't leave that digital footprint. Well, that's learned behavior. That's sophisticated behavior. There is a process by which individuals become more sophisticated over time, I think, as they get into it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Understanding the mindset of a child sex offender and how they interact with others engaged in the same activity is a vital part of identifying what kinds of initiatives may help prevent, disrupt, and reduce this crime type. Dr. Michael Bourke is chief psychologist of the behavioral analysis unit inside the United States Marshals Service. Michael's dedicated much of his life to try and get inside the minds of child sex offenders in an attempt to find out what motivates them to commit such unspeakable crimes against children.

Michael Bourke:

There's probably four primary pathways and these can overlap with one another. The first is a sexual attraction to children, such as pedophilia or what we call hebephilia, which is sexual attraction to teenagers. The second is a worldview or approach to life that permits indulgences such as hedonism over moral behavior. The third would be antisocial traits, whether that meets the criteria for a personality disorder or psychopathy, or if it's simply profound selfishness. It's a paucity or an absence of empathy. This could include profiteers such as pimps or traffickers, as well as those who physically abused children in addition to sexually abusing them. The fourth would be other related paraphilias, other deviant predilections to include sadism.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Child sex offenders will go to great lengths to hide their identity and be anonymous with their activity. It allows them to live what may appear to be, from the outside, relatively normal lives.

Michael Bourke:

Sex offenders are capable of engaging in what we call compartmentalization. They divide their lives up into these compartments wherein one compartment they might be doing things in secrecy, things in the darkness that they would not want anyone to know about. These are the deviant, or abusive, or exploitative types of behaviors. Whereas in other compartments, not only are they not monstrous, but, in fact, they might engage in what I call moral compensation. The pendulum will even swing a little bit further. They will be contributing to charitable organizations. They will have positions within a church or

temple. They will be seen in their community as these upstanding men and women, the people to look up to, the role models, the coaches, or the leaders of youth-serving organizations. They're a cross-section of humanity. They're not our lowest of the low. They're everybody.

Michael Bourke:

We had surgeons and attorneys. We had coaches from colleges. We had homeless individuals who had long histories of crime. It really runs the gamut. I think it's a mistake to act as if they have horns and are out there being completely destructive because I think what it does is that it hides that fact that they can appear so normal. In many ways they are. They can be very good school teachers. They can be very effective coaches.

Michael Bourke:

Many, many sex offenders, the parents of the children around them would say, "Oh, they're so good with children." There's a compartment, and there's an aspect to their lives that involves abusing and exploiting some of our most vulnerable fellow citizens, the children, the elderly, people with disabilities. They exploit those individuals. I would put it this way. Not only do predators and sex offenders groom children, but they're also grooming us. They're grooming the community. They're grooming our organisations. Awareness is very important for people. It doesn't mean we need to go out and become junior police officers. But vigilance is a way to salt the fields for sex offenders so that they don't really have as many opportunities to exploit children when they know that we are aware of the signs and that we are being vigilant with regard to child protection.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The reason the work of psychologists like Michael Burke is so important comes down to their knowledge about offender behaviors and the subsequent training that he and others can provide to law enforcement agencies, all working within the area of child protection, agencies like the ACCCE right here in Australia. Based in the Irish city of Cork, Joe Sullivan is a forensic psychologist who provides law enforcement agencies with insights around how child sex offenders function.

Joe Sullivan:

When it comes to investigations, they will... I'm asked to play off. It is initially, as an investigation is beginning, will be to inform the investigators about the particular type of crime that they are looking at. Not the general overview but, "Here we have a child that has been murdered, or a child that has been abducted, or a child that has been groomed online." What can I tell the investigators about the behavior and psychological characteristics of someone who will commit that type of crime? In investigations, I will narrow the focus significantly more into the type of crime, all the while trying to gather information about if there's a particular suspect. That's, generally, when I get asked to move to the next layer of what I can assist law enforcement with, which is the creation of a customised interview strategy for a particular suspect.

Joe Sullivan:

When a suspect is identified, I will be interested in any information that we can gather about that person, anything about their history, their background, their behavioral characteristics. All of that will be compiled into a character analysis of that particular person. That then allows me to customise... with the officers who are going to do the interview, customise the interview strategy. I can offer them advice about the type of questions that they can ask and the ways that they might approach someone of these

particular characteristics so that they have a point of reference, where they can come and ask questions about particular angles that they may want to approach during an investigation.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

With online child sexual exploitation being a borderless crime, it's never been more important for Australian police to have strong international collaboration. The AFP and the ACCCE work with international organisations like Interpol and Europol to share intelligence, online data, and resources. Cathal Delaney leads the team at Europol dealing with child sexual exploitation and says experience has shown that, as opposed to having a particular MO, Offenders will utilise a number of ways to try and access children online.

Cathal Delaney:

There are a lot of different ways in which offenders approach children. What they will try to do is identify a child who is vulnerable in some way. They will try to build up a conversation with them, gain their confidence essentially. Usually, they could come across them in any number of environments. That could be in social media, where they create an account that mimics a child of the same sex or a child of the opposite sex. Sometimes a child that's slightly older, or maybe an early adults because that can be attractive. Then, they will develop that relationship. You almost certainly will take them off the platform where they've originally met them. It could also be a gaming platform into a more secure and possibly encrypted channel. Then, they will start to ask them to give them more intimate details. They may ask them to provide intimate photos of themselves. Once they have intimate photos, then there are multiple possibilities available to them, including extorting more material.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Online child exploitation is not something that simply happens in other countries. It happens here in Australia, in our homes, and it can happen quickly. For Peter's 12-year-old son, all it took was one hour. One hour and Peter's son had been trapped by an online offender. At his request, we've not used the father's real name and have disguised his voice.

Peter:

In my son's case, they start by pretending to be a girl around their age or boy, whatever they're interested in. Send them a photo, and then say, "Send me a photo of you." Of course, it's a fake photo. Then, once they have that first nude photo of you, they then go, "Right. Now, you've got to do this, or I'm going to send that to your friends, or I'm going to post that on the internet, or I'm going to send it to your football team." They start extorting, getting the kids to make videos, do things to themselves that are quite painful, take more photos, even start a live video things with them. They make demands of them and commands of them. They're under their complete control. Then, the more the kids do, the more they're able to extort from them because they're able to use that material to threaten them further, to distribute the material, or send it to their friends, or post it. The manner in which they're controlled, exploited, the fear that they go through is still, today, would be hoping that some of this stuff doesn't surface.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In the first hour of the first day of contact, the online sex offender had access to the first photo of Peter's son. From there, the exploitation spiraled into a living nightmare.

Peter:

Very fast, first hour of the first day. After that, the whole next month was just continued exploitation. It didn't matter what situation you're in. If you're having dinner or whatever, he would go through it. He'd be exploited. He was threatened. I need the video now. I need a photo now, and it needs to be like this. You need to insert this here. You need to do that there. There's recordings where he's crying and saying, "This is hurting me." And the guy's going, "You've got to do it," or, "If don't have this in the next three minutes, I'm sending this stuff to your schoolmates," and all that type of stuff.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The moment of disclosure turned the world upside down for Peter and his son.

Peter:

He was with me. It was about 9:00 at night or 8:00 at night, and he said he had to go to his room urgently. He picked his phone up. I said, "No. Well, you leave your phone here." And he goes, "No, I need my phone." I'm like, "What for?" And he just started shaking. I said, "What's going on?" He said, "Well, I've got to go to my room." I said, "You don't have to go to your room. What's going on?" He said, "I'm scared to tell you." I said, "Well, if you're scared to tell me, then you really need to tell me." He goes, "I'm frightened of what will happen. He sat down with me. I've got a very good close relationship with him. He told me that there was a guy communicating with him over Instagram.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Brendan Hayler works within child protection operations at the AFP and led the investigation into the abuse of Peter's son in 2019.

Brendan Hayler:

He sat down and spoke with his father about it. His father was very good in knowing who to contact and getting contact with the AFP, and also being able to provide us with really detailed information, which allowed us to base the investigation on some good information and get it moving quite quickly.

Peter:

I didn't block the person straight away. I asked my son to go through all the communication that he had had. I said, "Just tell him you'll be there in one minute." He actually knew how to do screen recordings. The way these kids get through the devices is incredible. He did a screen recording of all the communication and everything that he'd had with this person. He was shaking crazily.

Brendan Hayler:

We're able to get a copy of the entire Instagram conversation that had occurred between this young person and the offender. We could see the chat from beginning to end. We could see when images were shared and how videos were shared. We couldn't see the actual material. That wasn't captured, but it gave us a really good idea of how this person was operating. It was an example wherein that chat, it was only three or four lines before the offender was requesting images of the child and that the child was providing those images. It got more sexualized after that, but it didn't take very long at all.

Peter:

Then, I informed the pedophile at the other end. I said, "This is his father. You're not going to be communicating with him anymore. I'm going to do my best to track you down, and anytime you share any of his material will bring me closer to you. You're not communicating with him." Then, he wrote back to my son and said, "Oh. Yeah, nice one. I know it's you. It's not your dad." Then, I stupidly sent him a photo of myself, pointing down the lens, and then type to him something, "And the next time you see this fight, you'll be in jail."

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In that incredibly difficult moment, Peter had the sense to realize that blocking the offender and deleting his son's account would be a mistake if he didn't download all that data first.

Peter:

We downloaded all the data in my son's account, which you can do. On all those social media accounts, you can download all the data. I then went and removed all the information that identified him one by one, so changed his name, removed photos. I just change the profile completely, so it was a different name, anything like that, and then deactivated it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Disclosing this extortion was an incredibly brave step for Peter's son. The trust placed in each other by father and son, the way they handled the information, and the reporting to police was what ultimately led to the arrest of the offender.

Brendan Hayler:

We arrested a 22-year-old male. As a result of searching his house, we found a number of hard drives, which contained a catalog, essentially, of images and videos that he'd captured. It revealed that he'd been doing this before and that he'd done it for quite a while. He had quite a collection of young people who he had extorted on Instagram and other platforms and kept the recordings of those interactions. Most of the children on Instagram were aged between about eight to 14, but he had images and material from children as young as four or five years old.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Kirsty Clarke is a member of the victim identification team within child protection at the AFP, who are responsible for trying to identify these other victims.

Kirsty Clarke:

The victim identification team focuses on identifying victims depicted in child abuse material. A small and dedicated team, who provides assistance to all investigators, where child abuse material is located by the AFP with an aim to identifying the child depicted in the seized material.

Kirsty Clarke:

My role in this particular operation was to sort through the seizure and try and group the victims together and get those clues. I try and identify and find a location, so Investigators could go out and speak to them. Some victims were easily able to be identified, for example, by their school shirt, or their school logo on their shirt that they're wearing, or their username on their social media platform. But others required a significant amount of work to establish a location. I guess one of the big things about

when I actually look at the material, building the intelligence profile around the victim, for example, if I say certain bedspreads, or toys, or pyjamas, or clothing, I would mark that as an item of interest because we might say that child wearing that pajama or having that toy six months down the track. I can go back using the software and say, show me all images with that child wearing that pajama. We would be able to link that child to the actual abuse material itself.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In the case of Peter's son, the full extent of the offender's behavior was revealed over a period of months after Kirsty and her team had painstakingly gone through all the material.

Kirsty Clarke:

After months and months of sorting the material, it was established that there were over a hundred children in Australia and overseas that were in contact with our Australian offender. He was particularly manipulative and really preyed on vulnerable children. I got the sense that he knew there was a real fear in children that their parents would find out, and he took advantage of that. He was very sophisticated and pretended to be someone else using their photograph or persona and had multiple personas in order to talk to these children and gain their trust and connect with that victim. Once he built that relationship with those children, and he gained their trust, he was then able to get sexually explicit material of them and then used that sexually explicit material to blackmail them to produce further material of themselves. We don't know how long that offender would have kept going for over a hundred victims is significant. But in a year's time, could he have had 250 victims. We just don't know.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

We've heard how people who target children for the purposes of sexual harm can be very adept at hiding that part of their life. They exist in everyday communities with very few people aware of their dark behavior. The fact that they target children via devices, which these kids are using to socialize with their friends, do homework, and play games, makes the behavior even more insidious. Detective Inspector Jon Rouse is a veteran of child sexual abuse investigations and has been tracking and pursuing online offenders since the early days of the internet. He's told parents if they'd seen what he'd seen, they'd never allow kids in their bedroom with an internet-capable device.

Jon Rouse:

Many things prompted that, but I think one particular video that I saw was the catalyst, a video recorded screen capture of a Skype communication between a child sex offender and a child. All you could see was the text commands that the child sex offender give the child, but you could see that this child sitting in front of her web camera and in what appeared to be her bedroom in her house. At one point, I do remember that you can actually hear a member of the family call out to her through the door.

Jon Rouse:

I've seen many, many challenging things in my career, but to see a little girl who would be about 12 or 13, crying, tears streaming down her face at the beginning of this video was really, really sad because she knew what she was about to go through. For the next 37 minutes, she obeyed the instructions of this individual and performed some horrendous acts on herself in what you would think would be the safety and sanctity of her own home while her family were home. The end of the video finishes with the offender telling her not to tell anybody. He won't put it on the internet. She'd been a good slave.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

There are simply no words to describe the level of abuse being experienced by these kids at the hands of these offenders. Sadly, there are victims whose stories are yet to be told. Still, according to ACCCE market research, around awareness of online child sexual exploitation, 80% of Australian parents believe it'll never happen to their kids. Unfortunately, there may come a time when some of these parents receive a visit from police, and their innocence, or maybe ignorance, will be shattered.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

AFP detective, Superintendent Paula Hudson, works at the ACCCE and leads the AFP Child Protection and Human Trafficking Operations teams. Paula says breaking the news to a parent that their child's been a victim of online sexual exploitation can be devastating.

Paula Hudson:

It's one of the hardest jobs for our members, I guess you go to the house and speak to the family. People don't believe it. The hard part about passing the message and saying, "We actually have a video or photographs of your child being abused." That's the hard message to pass. But in the mind, most people don't believe you when you're saying that to them because people don't want to believe it. They would rather go straight into denial because people just do not believe you and then don't want to say the imagery to be shown. You don't want to put them in that position, but it's a very difficult conversation to have once it has taken place. It's something that can't be undone.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's heartbreaking to think that these conversations need to be had at all. It really does bring home how important it is to teach our kids about protecting themselves online. Kirsty Clarke has three simple messages for kids.

Kirsty Clarke:

Keep your wits about you online, and don't take off your clothes, and don't give out your personal information. It sounds basic, but if an offender doesn't know your personal information, they don't have photographs or images of you without your clothes, and just having your wits about you online, they really cannot take advantage of you. They can't blackmail you. It sounds simple, but they're the type of things that we need to get out to victims or children online. If you can just remember those three things, we'll have a lot more kids being safe online.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Once we give our kids access to an internet-enabled device, we have to know that they can chat to anyone, and anyone from anywhere in the world can chat to them.

Kirsty Clarke:

It's about having that open conversation with your kids, knowing what applications that they're on, and just being one step ahead of them. Get on the apps that they're on, know who they're talking to online, and if something does happen, don't punish them. Don't take away their internet access. It's about having that open conversation and being educated, and just being open with your child, just to know what they're doing and help them through a pretty challenging time in their life. They're growing up,

and they're having to have a persona online, which we need to keep on top of, but we don't want them to be isolated at the same time.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's why the most important chat is the ongoing one parents need to be having with their kids around online safety. In episode five of Closing the Net, we speak with some remarkable families who have experienced the unimaginable but somehow managed to find a way of turning their grief into hope.

Bruce Morcombe:

There was a resolve within our family that whoever took Daniel, who is responsible, is not going to destroy this family. We made sure we had time for each other. We gave each other a bit of space if you're on a better day than somebody else.

Sonya Ryan:

I just knew I had to do something. I guess I just didn't see any limitation. If my daughter had to face what she had to face, she's not going to go through such suffering for nothing. I'm going to make sure of it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

If the content in this podcast has caused any distress, or if you know a child is being contacted or groomed online, visit ACCCE.gov.au to find out how to report and where you can seek support. If you see child abuse material online, it's important to report it to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, who can help get it removed. If you think a child is in immediate danger, please call 000 or your local police. You can provide anonymous information to crimestoppers.com.au or by phoning 1800 333 000.

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