

## Information sheet

# Recognising online coercive control in young people's lives

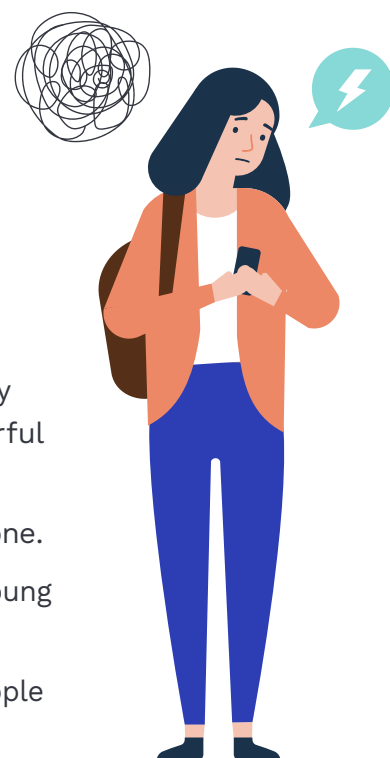
This information sheet is about coercive control that can be experienced by a young person in a relationship.

## Understanding coercive control and its impact

- Coercive control is not a single act, but a pattern of behaviour designed to manipulate, intimidate, and control another person.
- Digital technologies are often used as part of coercive control (sometimes known as tech-based coercive control), to help a person gain and keep power over the other person.
- Coercive control creates fear and slowly wears down a young person's independence and sense of who they are.
- Some controlling behaviours, such as tracking using location services, constant messaging, knowing each other's passwords and passphrases, are often seen as signs of love by people, which normalises abuse.
- Various platforms including social media can be used to control someone, for example: by tracking when they're online or monitoring who they interact with. This behaviour can make it harder for others to notice what's going on.

## How technology has enabled coercive control among young people

- Most of us rely on digital devices as well as technologies that use internet connections to communicate and keep in touch. This includes messaging apps, social media, emails and other online platforms and services.
- While technology and digital devices come with many positives, they have it's also opened new channels for harm. Technology is a powerful tool in facilitating coercive control.
- Everyday apps can be misused to monitor, pressure or control someone.
- Digital abuse is often hidden, making it hard to recognise – both for young people who may be experiencing it and for the adults in their lives.
- The signs of digital control can be subtle, making it hard for young people to identify what's happening.



## Behaviours to watch for

- **Obsessive texting or calling** – constantly demanding communication, which isolates young people from friends and family and creates dependency on the other person.
- **Demanding constant location sharing** – which is framed as care but is a means of control.
- **Monitoring someone's social media and online activity** – making them question their own perceptions or feel uncertain about what really happened.
- **Pressuring for intimate images** – demanding explicit photos or videos can create fear or pressure, particularly if there's a threat they'll be shared without consent ([image-based abuse](#)). This behaviour can also be used to intimidate or manipulate, leaving the other person feeling trapped.

## Stages of coercive control

Coercive control typically unfolds in stages; each aimed at gradually increasing control over the other person. The stages can happen at different times in a relationship and don't have to follow a particular order.

- **Love bombing:** The person initially showers their girlfriend/boyfriend with affection, compliments, and grand gestures. This creates a strong emotional bond, making it harder to recognise manipulation. Young people in their first relationships may not always know what healthy respectful behaviour looks like.
- **Isolation:** This can happen gradually – starting with subtle requests to spend more time together and escalating to behaviours that cause the young person to pull away from friends and family, often by undermining their trust in others or creating conflict.
- **Manipulation and control:** Once isolated, the controlling behaviour often escalates – through intimidation, constant criticism, or attempts to micromanage how the young person acts, leading to confusion and anxiety and a growing sense of dependence.

## Why young people stay in coercive relationships

Young people remain in coercive relationships due to a range of emotional and psychological factors:

- **Emotional dependency:** The intensity of the love bombing phase can create strong emotional bonds, making it difficult to separate even when things become unhealthy. Some young people may hope the relationship will return to how it felt at the beginning.
- **Fear of consequences:** The person may worry about what will happen if they leave, such as being threatened or socially isolated. The relationship – despite its issues – can feel like a source of identity, security or belonging.
- **Low self-esteem:** Over time, the constant criticism, controlling behaviour or emotional manipulation can erode a young person's confidence, making them doubt their own worth or ability to cope without the other person.
- **Peer cultural and social media influence:** Controlling behaviours are sometimes normalised in peer groups, pop culture, or on social media, where unhealthy dynamics can be romanticised or minimised. Seeing these patterns reflected can make the behaviour seem more acceptable or typical.

# Supporting young people experiencing coercive control

- **Recognise early warning signs:** Look for changes in behaviour, such as withdrawing from social activities, secretive communication, or increased anxiety.
- **Avoid judgment or ultimatums:** Provide a safe space for young people to share their experiences without fear of criticism or pressure.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** This may include, ‘How do you feel when your boyfriend or girlfriend texts you constantly?’ or ‘What happens if you don’t respond immediately?’
- **Offer ongoing support:** Be consistent and reliable, modelling healthy relationships and offering support without pressure.
- **Advise about healthy relationships:** Have proactive conversations about boundaries, consent, and respect. This helps young people navigate relationships and recognise early signs of coercive control.

## Reporting harm

You can help young people to collect evidence and report the coercive control if it is part of [cyberbullying](#) targeting someone under 18, [adult cyber abuse](#) or [image-based abuse](#) (sharing, or threatening to share, an intimate image or video without the [consent](#) of the person shown).

Find out more at [Report online harm](#).

## Getting support

If a young person is experiencing coercive control, you can help them reach out to support services, for confidential advice.

<a href="#">1800Respect</a>	1800 737 732	Counselling, information and support 24/7
<a href="#">Kids Helpline</a>	1800 55 1800	24 hours a day, seven days a week – Phone and webchat 5 to 25-year-olds
<a href="#">headspace</a>	1800 650 890	Online and telephone services 12 to 25-year-olds

## eSafety resources

[Young people](#)

[Online dating](#)

Last updated 01/05/25