A Part of Reality

ON CHILDREN, SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE INTERNET

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Children, sexual abuse and the internet

Playing games, watching video clips, listening to music, finding out facts, reading the news, buying and selling things, hanging out, getting to know new people, flirting, sending messages, photos and videos...These are just some of the online activities in which both children and adults engage. These interactions do not just take place between peers; children also use the internet to communicate with their parents and schools.

For children, it can seem unnatural to discriminate between contacts online and offline. They may need to pause and reflect if asked if someone is an online contact; many of their relationships exist both on and off the Web.

As with the rest of our daily lives, online life entails encounters with both good and bad phenomena. And just like in other arenas, children can be exposed to sexual abuse online, both by other children and young people and by adults. On the internet, people who exploit children have found new platforms and new tools by which to come in contact with children. It is important that everyone who works with children learn more about internet-related abuse, how common these incidents are, what sets them apart from other forms of abuse, and how children affected by such abuse react. Knowledge is necessary to prevent these attacks and to help children who remain at risk to obtain the protection and rehabilitation to which they are entitled.

In this report, we will summarize the results of various research studies. Much of the material is from a Swedish national study, which we will refer to as "the national survey." It was conducted by researchers at Linköping and Lund universities, within the framework of a mission that the Children's Welfare Foundation was assigned by the government. The research team consists of Carl Göran Svedin, Gisela Priebe, Marie Wadsby, Linda Jonsson and Cecilia Fredlund.
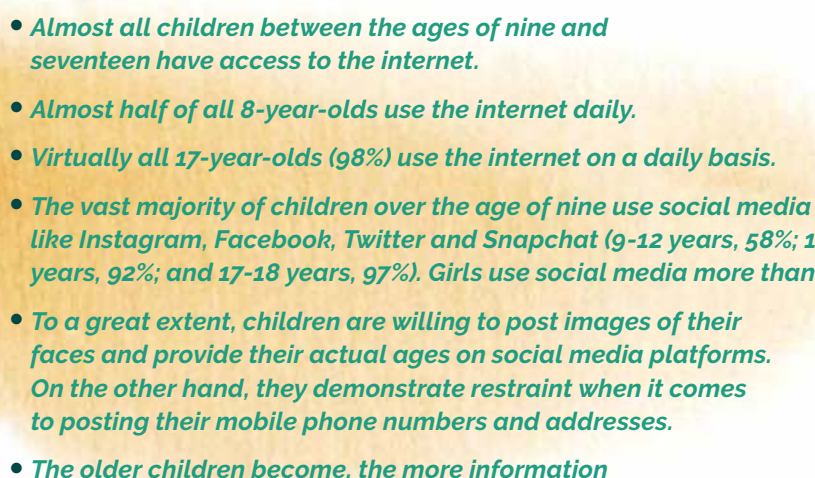
The purpose of this summary is to disseminate the study's most urgent research findings to a wider audience. We recommend that those who wish to learn more avail themselves of the earlier reports. [1,2,3]

The research results have been supplemented with observations from the authors' experiences of meetings with children who have been victims of online abuse and with professionals who work with that target group. The quotes that appear in speech bubbles are drawn from interviews with these children.

Children, the internet and social media

Since 2005, the Swedish Media Council has followed Swedish children's and young people's use and experiences of various media. Recurrent surveys show that Swedish children's use of mobile phones, the internet, and social media has increased radically. The number of children aged 9-12 who use the internet for more than three hours each day has nearly quadrupled over a ten year period. The proportion of children who use mobile phones for more than three hours each day is twelve times what it was just six years ago. Internet and mobile phones are now an integral part of children's daily lives. What was once considered to be a high level of consumption is now considered average.

- *Almost all children between the ages of nine and seventeen have access to the internet.*

- *Almost half of all 8-year-olds use the internet daily.*

- *Virtually all 17-year-olds (98%) use the internet on a daily basis.*

- *The vast majority of children over the age of nine use social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat (9-12 years, 58%; 13-16 years, 92%; and 17-18 years, 97%). Girls use social media more than boys.*

- *To a great extent, children are willing to post images of their faces and provide their actual ages on social media platforms. On the other hand, they demonstrate restraint when it comes to posting their mobile phone numbers and addresses.*

- *The older children become, the more information they are willing to share via social media.*

- *A majority of children let their parents to see everything they post on social media. Younger children allow their parents to follow their posts more closely than older ones do (73% of 9-12 year olds compared with 57% of 17-18 year olds).* [4,5]

Children's contact with online pornography

Many children come in contact with pornography via the internet. Pornography is not illegal, but it may be considered to be unsuitable or harmful for children to be exposed to pornography, which is produced for adult consumption.

In a study by the Swedish Media Council, children aged thirteen and older were asked if they had watched pornographic videos online within the last year. Younger children were not surveyed.[6] 29 percent of 13-16-year-olds and 49% of 17-year-olds had watched pornographic videos online within the past year. The gender differences were large. In total, 58 percent of boys had watched pornography on the web within the last year, and 28 percent had watched pornographic videos one or more times per week. A smaller proportion of girls (17 percent) had watched pornography within the past year, and three percent of them had watched pornography one or more times per week.

The teenagers who watched pornography online were asked to describe the impressions of that/what they had seen. The most common answer was that the material hadn't made any particular impression, or that they didn't care about them. An equal proportion of girls

and boys liked what they saw (31%). The proportion of girls who liked the pornograhic images they watched online has increased steadily and sharply compared with previous surveys; the gender gap in this area seems to have disappeared altogether. There were also teenagers who were upset or who thought it was disgusting to watch pornography (13% of the boys compared with 28% of the girls who had watched pornography online within the last year).

The teenagers who watched pornographic videos usually searched for it themselves (63% of the boys and 58% of the girls) or said that a friend had shown them the video(s) (31% of the boys and 20% of the girls). Teenagers also encountered pornography by chance or by accident (19% of the boys and 33% of the girls).[7]

Children who post or send nude images

Children sometimes send or post nude or sexually explicit images of themselves. Images can be sent to one or more selected recipients, i.e. via email, SMS, Messenger or Snapchat. Images can be posted to different types of online forums and will then be available to anyone who enters the site. Sending or posting nude photos of oneself is sometimes referred to as "sexting."

Many adults are concerned about teenagers who send nude images. The myths are many. One might hear that most teenagers send or post nude photos, or that almost all who send photos get in trouble.[8]

What the national survey tells us about nude photos/videos

About a quarter of students surveyed (25%) had ever sent a nude photo or video. It was more common for girls and students who did not identify as male or female to send images than it was for boys to do so. Most respondents had sent the images to someone they knew well.

The students had sent the nude photos/videos to:

- *A partner 68%*
- *A friend 31%*
- *Someone I met online 22%*
- *No one I know personally 7.4%*
- *An adult who I know personally 2.3%.*

In the previous 12 months, 16 percent of students had been asked to send sexually explicit photos/videos of themselves by someone they knew exclusively through online contact. A large percentage of those questioned had done so (41%). A comparison with surveys from 2009 and 2014 shows that it has become somewhat more unusual for students to be asked to send sexually explicit images of themselves than it was when the last survey was conducted. However, it has been more common for students to comply with such a request.

The students were asked if they ever post nude photos/videos online. This was considerably more unusual than sending nude images. In total, 2.1 percent replied that they had posted such an image. It was more common for boys to post photos or videos than it was for girls to do so. The practice was most common among students who identified as neither male nor female.[10,11]

Percentage of students who sent nude images via the internet:

Never sent an image
Sent nude images

25%
75%
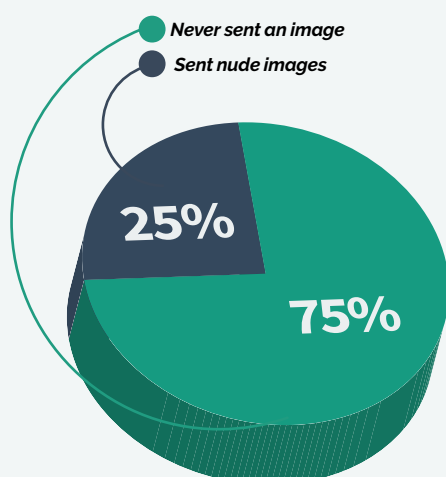
Percentage of students who posted nude images via the internet:

Never posted an image
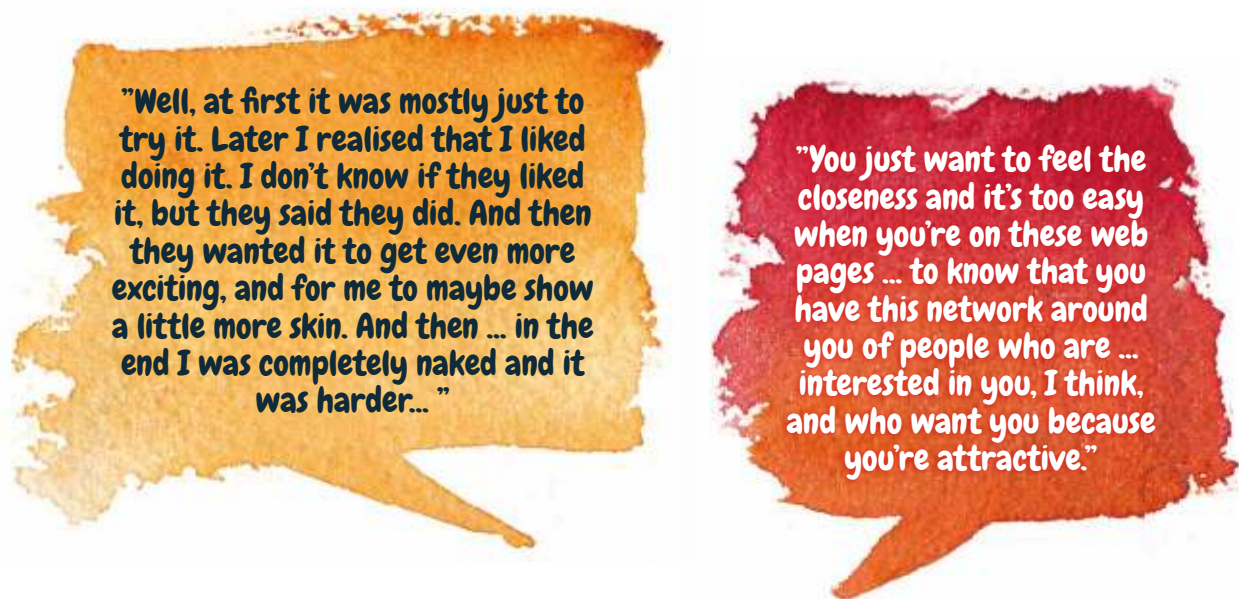Posted nude images

2%
98%
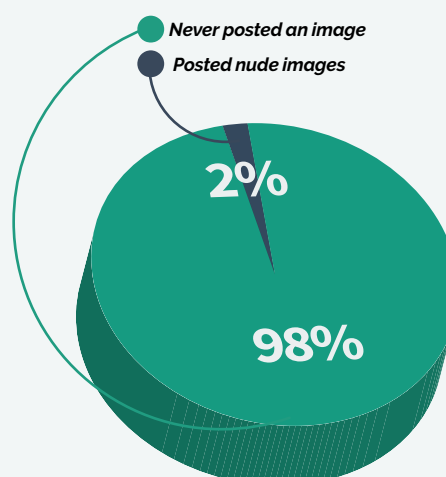
In an interview study conducted in the EU project SPIRTO, young people recounted why they had sent nude photos. The motives varied; respondents often cited numerous reasons for doing so.

These included:

- *It's fun/a way to flirt and meet new people*
- *A way to explore their sexuality*
- *A way to gain affirmation*
- *It's socially accepted; everyone else is doing it*
- *It's expected when you're in a romantic relationship*
- *They had been asked to send a photo or been forced to send a photo.*[12]

Despite the fact that few respondents had had very negative experiences in connection with sending a nude photo, many were uneasy about what would happen to the photo(s) once they were sent. Those interviewed in the SPIRTO project gave advice about sending or posting nude photos.

"Well, at first it was mostly just to try it. Later I realised that I liked doing it. I don't know if they liked it, but they said they did. And then they wanted it to get even more exciting, and for me to maybe show a little more skin. And then ... in the end I was completely naked and it was harder... "

"You just want to feel the closeness and it's too easy when you're on these web pages ... to know that you have this network around you of people who are ... interested in you, I think, and who want you because you're attractive."

Advice from children and young people to other children and young people:

- *Only send photos to people you know and trust!*
- *Never send photos because you are being pressured, coerced or threatened!*
- *Nude photos are not a "given" in a relationship!*
- *Only send photos that you feel comfortable with, and which you're OK with other people seeing!*
- *If you're unsure or worried - don't send it!*

The young people who were interviewed had usually not told a parent or adult that they had sent nude photos, because they considered that information to be private. However, they thought it was important that parents be open and able to talk about nude photos in a way that makes children and young people feel like they can tell them if something should go wrong.

Advice for parents from children and young people:

- *Keep up to date about what young people are doing online*

- *Understand sending nude photos is a natural part of growing up*

- *Discuss the risks of sending nude photos with your children*

- *If your child runs into problems after sending a nude picture, be supportive and talk with your child.*

- *Don't be judgmental and don't get angry!*

Advice from children and young people to adults who work with children:

- *All personnel need continuous training about young people and their internet habits*

- *All students must receive training at school about how they can stay safe. It should include information about both positive and negative consequences*

- *Educate those who spread nude material!*

- *If the photos are disseminated at school, the school should take action. For example, the adults can tell the students to erase the photos*

- *Take it seriously!*

Sexual abuse of children

"Sexual abuse is the form of interpersonal abuse that is most damaging to an individual's sense of personal integrity and which has the most obvious consequences in terms of mental and physical health." (Carl Göran Svedin, Professor Emeritus and Research Director at Barnafrid, 2017)

Sexual abuse can take many forms. Most children in Sweden are never exposed to sexual abuse, either online or offline.

According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, inducing or forcing a child to participate in any type of illegal or mentally harmful sexual activity constitutes sexual abuse. Sexual abuse comprises the use of children for commercial sexual purposes, producing sound recordings or images of the sexual abuse of children, child prostitution, sexual slavery, sexual exploitation in the context of travel, trafficking, child trafficking, and forced marriage. The sexual abuse of children can be both physical and nonphysical.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child stresses that various forms of violence against children often occur at the same time, and both boys and girls are at risk of being subjected to all forms of violence. However, the violence is often gender-based.[13]

What the national survey tells us about sexual abuse

The students were asked if anyone had ever exposed him/herself to them, if they had ever been persuaded, pressured, or forced to masturbate in front of someone or have sex with someone, or if someone else had tried to undress them or had touched their genital area against their will.

Just over one in five students (21%) had experienced one or more of the forms of abuse about which they were questioned. The girls were three times more likely to have experienced sexual abuse (29%, compared to 10% of the boys). Students who identified as neither male nor female were most vulnerable to sexual abuse. A whopping 40% of them had been subjected to abuse.

The girls had experienced:

- *No abuse 71%*
- *Some abuse 29%*
- *Abuse without physical contact 7.6%*
- *Abuse with physical contact 13%*
- *Vaginal, anal, or oral abuse 9.2%*

The boys had experienced:

- *No abuse 91%*
- *Some abuse 9.6%*
- *Abuse without physical contact 3.4%*
- *Abuse with physical contact 3.1%*
- *Vaginal, oral, or anal abuse 3.0%* [14]

Girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse (regardless of the age of the person who abused them)

Boys' vulnerability to sexual abuse (regardless of the age of the person who abused them)

Never exposed to sexual abuse
Victim of sexual abuse

29%
71%

Never exposed to sexual abuse
Victim of sexual abuse

10%
90%

***What the Convention on the Rights of the Child says
about the sexual abuse of children***

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) applies to all children in Sweden. Some of the articles are of particular relevance for children who are victims of violence:

- *Article 1. A child is any human being below the age of 18.*

- *Article 2. All children have the same rights and equal value. No child shall be subjected to discrimination of any kind.*

- *Article 3. The best interests of the child must always be the primary consideration.*

- *Article 12. The child has the right to express his/ her views on all matters that affect him/her.*

- *Article 19. The child has the right to protection from physical or psychological violence, and from neglect or abuse by parents and other legal guardians.*

- *Article 34. The child has the right to protection from all forms of sexual abuse and from exploitation for prostitution or pornographic purposes.*

- *Article 39. Children who are victims of neglect, exploitation, neglect, torture, armed conflicts or other inhuman treatment have the right to rehabilitation and social reintegration.*

The role of the internet in the sexual abuse of children

Children may encounter their abusers both online and offline. Some children only interact with their abusers online. Sometimes only the first contact takes place online, and the abuse occurs at another location. Those who subject children to abuse (no matter how they come into contact with the child) may disseminate texts or images online.

Many terms and concepts are used to describe internet-based sexual abuse. They tend to overlap, and sometimes describe the same thing. In this report we primarily describe adult contact with children for sexual purposes (so-called "online grooming"), abuse by a person the child has never met offline (also referred to as "virtual sexual abuse"), sexual abuse images and sexual exploitation.

Abuse committed by someone who a child got to know online

The way in which a child gets to know his/her abuser provides some idea of the important role that the internet can play, but not the whole picture. It also happens that a person who a child knows in another context may also use the internet to subject him/her to sexual abuse. People who expose children to offline abuse may also disseminate photos or videos of the abuse online.

However, only a small proportion of all child sexual abuse is committed by someone who the child met online.

What the national survey tell us about online contact

The students who said that they had been subjected to sexual abuse were asked: The first time you were abused, who did it?

Around 7.5 percent of the students who had experienced sexual abuse were abused by someone who they initially met online. This is a much smaller percentage than the number of children who were abused by a peer. However, this is a higher percentage than those who had been abused by family members or relatives.[15,16]

Attempts by adults to establish contact with children via the internet for sexual purposes

According to Swedish law, it is a criminal offense for an adult to contact a child for sexual purposes via the internet.

Adults who initiate contact with children online employ different strategies to do so. Some take the time to get to know the child and create a relationship **(example 1)**. Others talk about sex or make sexual propositions directly **(example 2)**. There are also perpetrators who use serious threats and blackmail to initiate contact, in order to get the child to perform sex acts **(example 3)**.

The form of abuse described in the first category is insidious, because it plays on the child's need for friendship and love. The abuser uses the emotions and bonds that have been formed as a weapon by which to exploit the child. There are also other forms of contact that do not clearly fall into a single category of contact attempts for sexual purposes. They include elements of different categories, and may change over time. Even if the relationship began amicably, threats or violence may be introduced later.

EXAMPLE 1

Julia draws and paints a lot, and posts pictures of her art on social media. She is contacted by a man who expresses admiration for her pictures. At first, he doesn't seem all that interested in her, but rather in her artwork. Over time, they develop a friendship. The man writes that she is so mature for her age, and that she knows so much about life. Julia tells him about herself, and about her problems with her friends and parents. She feels that the man understands her, and although they have never met, she falls in love with him. They have known each other for half a year before he suggests that they should meet offline. When they do, he wants to have sex with her. Julia is eleven years old.

EXAMPLE 2

Adam likes boys, but doesn't dare tell anyone he knows. He is afraid that people will no longer accept him if they learn that he is gay. Online, he can be more free. When he writes that he thinks he is gay, he is immediately propositioned by numerous adult men who want to have sex with him. Adam is thirteen years old.

EXAMPLE 3

Hanna receives a message. A man sends a photo of her house. He writes that she has an hour to send a nude photo of herself. If she doesn't comply, he and his friends will come to her house and rape her. Hanna is fourteen years old.

Prolonged connection-building for the purposes of sexual abuse. No threats.
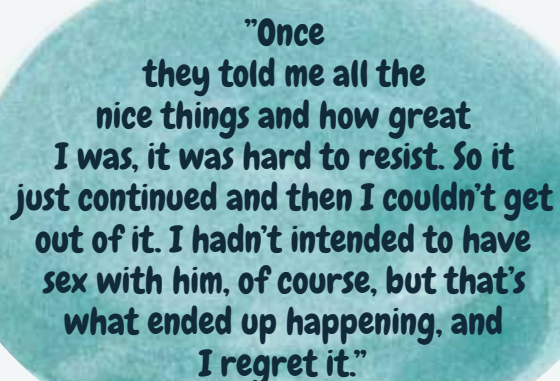
Direct sexual propositions and clearly stated threats.

What the national survey tells us about sexual abuse that occurs following contact online

The students were asked: Before you turned 15, did any person you met online and who you believe or know was at least five years older than you:

1. *Tried to get you to talk about sex?*

2. *Asked you to show him/her nude photos of yourself, or similar content?*

3. *Asked to meet you to for the purpose of doing something sexual?*

4. *Showed or sent you nude photos?*

"Once they told me all the nice things and how great I was, it was hard to resist. So it just continued and then I couldn't get out of it. I hadn't intended to have sex with him, of course, but that's what ended up happening, and I regret it."

Less than a quarter (23%) of the students had been exposed to sexual online contact attempts by an adult before the age of fifteen. They differed from other students in a number of areas:

- *They were more likely to be victims of various forms of violence, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation than the other students were. There were significant gender differences when it came to vulnerability. Girls were more often sexually abused, whereas boys more often were victims of physical and emotional violence. The boys who had experienced sexual online contact attempts before the age of fifteen were also more likely to have sold sex than girls who had experienced such contact.*

- *were more likely to be exposed to bullying*

- *had poorer relationships with their parents*

- *generally had lower self-esteem and poorer mental health.*

Students who had experienced sexual online contact attempts by adults before the age 15 also differed from other students when it came to their media habits. They used mobile phones and social media to a much greater extent than other survey respondents. [17,18]

Previous research has shown that children who have been contacted over the internet for sexual purposes were more likely to engage in general risk-taking behavior, and used alcohol and drugs to a greater extent than their age cohorts. They more frequently reported that they had problems at home and/or at school, and were more likely to have been subjected to bullying and to theft and violent crimes.[19]

PLEASE NOTE! Other young people and people who do not fit the definition of being at least five years older may also use the web as a means to connect with children who they subsequently subject to sexual abuse!

Abuse by a person the child had never met offline (virtual sexual assault)

A child is a victim of a sexual assault if he or she is persuaded or forced to participate in any illegal or mentally harmful sexual activity (see the definition under the heading "Sexual abuse of children"). The child don't need to have physical contact with the abuser. Abuse by a person the child had never met offline is sometimes referred to as "virtual sexual abuse" or "virtual rape."

The online abuse can cause children to feel that they are stuck in a vicious spiral from which there is no escape. The abuser can contact them anytime, day or night. This causes places that might otherwise seem safe (i.e. the child's school, home or bedroom) to feel as if they have been invaded.

In instances of sexual abuse that occur exclusively online, children may be forced or induced to send or post nude or sexually explicit images of themselves, or the abuser may send nude photos of him/herself to the child. The child may also be forced or induced to participate in sexual activities via a webcam or to engage in sexual conversations online.

The word sextortion – a combination of the words "sex" and "extortion" (blackmail) – is sometimes used internationally to describe instances in which a person is forced or blackmailed into engaging in sex acts.[20] Sextortion can affect both adults and children. Sometimes photos taken in the context of a romantic or sexual relationship are subsequently used as a weapon by a partner or former partner. The threat of spreading the images can be used to force the former partner to get back together or simply as a means to cause harm. This is sometimes called revenge porn.

In some cases of sextortion, an abuser may meet a person via the internet and then use threats or sexually explicit images to force the victim to send him/her more photos or to perform sex acts. Once a child has sent a nude photo, that image can be used to pressure him/her to send more explicit ones, to commit sex acts in front of a camera, or to meet an abuser and have sex with him/her. The threat that the photos will be disseminated to family members, friends and acquaintances can lead children into a vicious spiral that they can't escape and in which the abuse escalates.

What the national survey tells us about virtual sexual assault

The students were asked:

1. *Have you met someone on the internet in the last 12 months with whom you subsequently had virtual sex?*

2. *If yes: Did you feel persuaded, pressured or forced at any point in the interaction?*

Relatively few students (5.8%) had had sexual contact with someone they met online within the last 6 months. A majority of them had not been uncomfortable with the contact, but a total of 32 students (9.8%) had felt persuaded, pressured or forced at some point in the interaction.

Most of those who had had sex with someone they met online had done so with someone of the same age or slightly older. But those who have been persuaded, pressured or forced to engage in such activities had usually met someone who was slightly older or at least five years older than themselves. When it came to their socio-demographic backgrounds and internet use, no differences were noted between the victims of abuse and those who had not been subjected to it. [21,22]

> "They said 'send another' and I didn't dare say no. When I webcammed, they didn't want to see my face, so I could cry every time I filmed." [23]

Child sexual abuse images

Some abusers who expose children to sexual abuse document their actions with photos or videos. Historically, this has been referred to as child pornography. The term is still used in Swedish legislation. We have instead chosen to refer to these photos and videos as child sexual abuse images.

The organization ECPAT Sweden operates a notification page where the public can report cases of suspected child sex trafficking. In 2016, ECPAT rated material from 1100 tips to be illegal; the reports most often pertained to child sexual abuse images. The photos or videos featured children of different ages and the content of the images ranged from sexually explicit poses to sadism and torture. These images are sometimes produced in a studio environment, but the sexual exploitation was often documented in home environments.[24]

Children who were identified as having been featured in sexual abuse images were interviewed in conjunction with a Swedish study. The children in the images never spontaneously talked about what they had suffered; the revelations only emerged in connection with police investigations. Even then the police told the children about the photos/videos or showed them the images, the children often continued to deny that they were in them. Other children only shared information that they thought the interviewers already knew. Getting the children to talk in the police interviews was like peeling an onion; the less serious instances of abuse were easier for them to talk about than the more serious ones.[25]
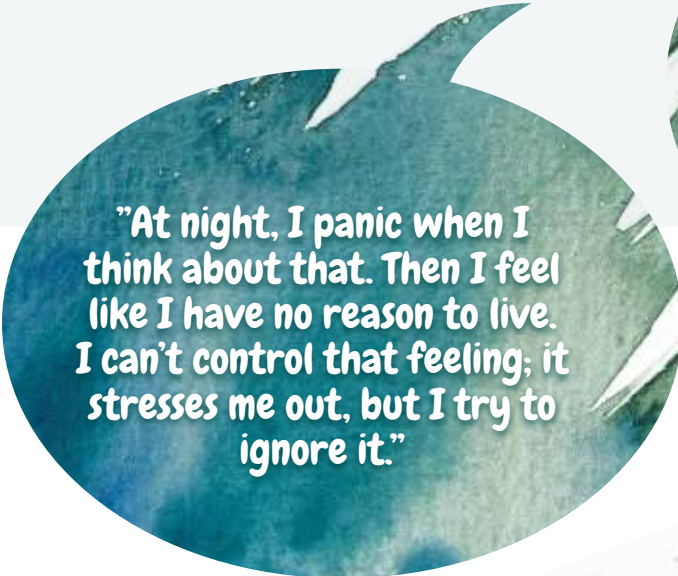
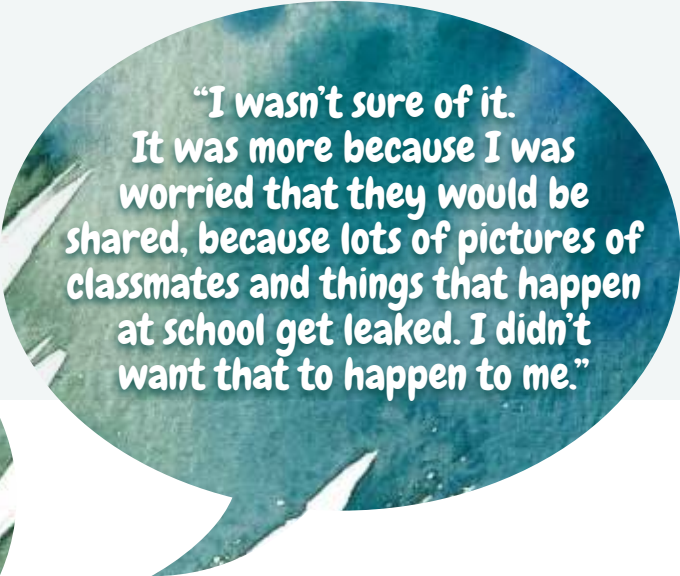## What the national survey tells us about sexual abuse images

The students who responded that they had been victims of some form of sexual abuse were asked to answer follow-up questions:

Were you ever photographed/filmed? Have the photos/videos been distributed, i.e. via the internet?

Few students reported that they had been photographed or filmed during an incident of sexual abuse (4.6%). But a greater number of them (12% of those who had suffered abuse) did not know whether the abuse had been documented. Of the fifty students who knew they were photographed or filmed, thirteen stated that they also knew that the images had been disseminated. An additional fifteen young people were uncertain.[26,27]

"I wasn't sure of it. It was more because I was worried that they would be shared, because lots of pictures of classmates and things that happen at school get leaked. I didn't want that to happen to me."

"At night, I panic when I think about that. Then I feel like I have no reason to live. I can't control that feeling; it stresses me out, but I try to ignore it."

The sexual exploitation of children online

In Swedish legislation, it is prohibited to pay for sex. Cases in which someone under the age of eighteen is paid for sex are considered particularly severe. It is not forbidden to receive compensation for sex, although it is often considered to be taboo and is associated with feelings of shame.

What the national survey tells us about online sexual exploitation

Most children have never received compensation for sex. A total of 51 pupils (0.9%) had ever done so. The percentage was higher among boys (1.2%) than among girls (0.6%). Among the students who identified as neither male nor female, 3.8 percent had received compensation for sex at some point.

Almost half of the young people who had sold sex stated that contact with the buyer had been initiated via the internet (45%). These online interactions occurred roughly equally often in open chat forums and on dating or sex sites as they did via social networks that do not focus on sex. Girls who had sold sex were more likely to have made contact with the buyer online (62%) than boys who had done so (36%).[28]
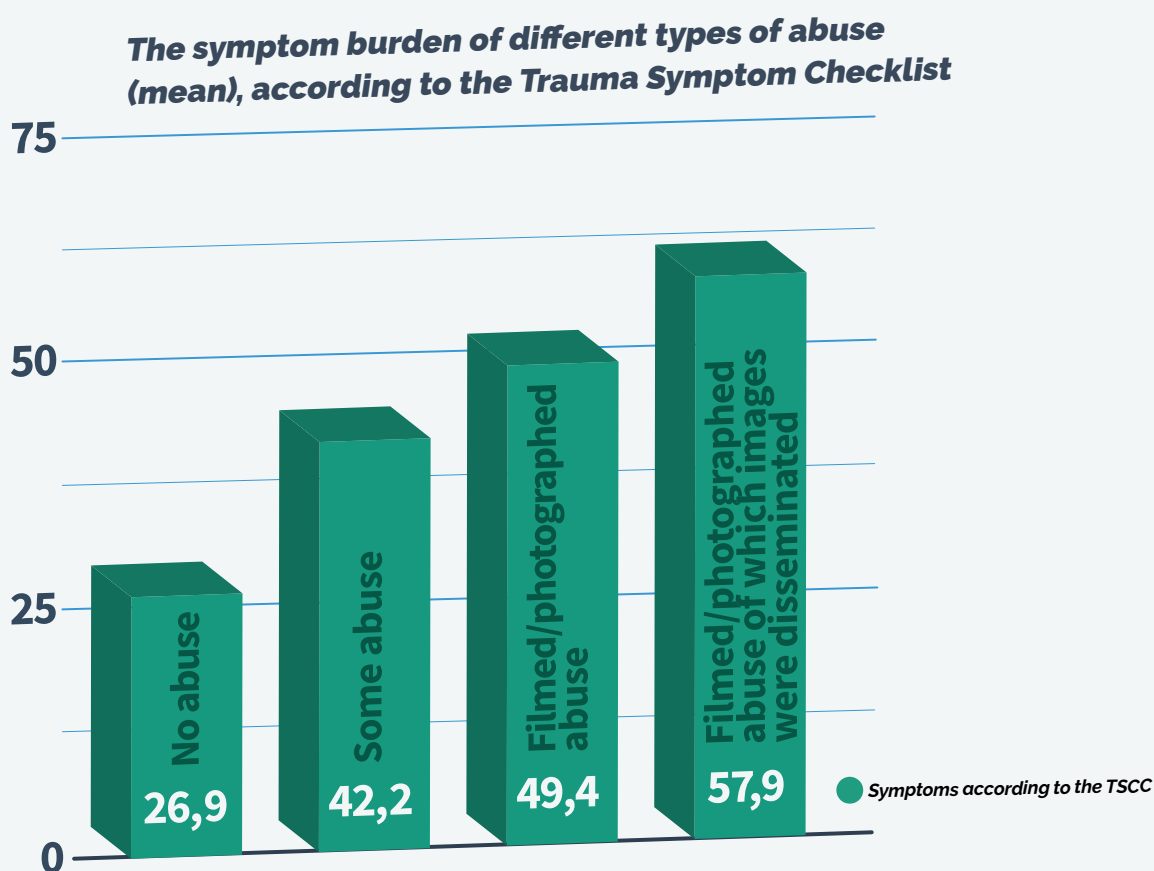

Can online abuse result in equally serious consequences as abuse that occurs offline?

Online sexual abuse is sometimes regarded as less severe than abuse that occurs offline. Professionals or other adults may think that it is less severe, but research shows otherwise. The national survey showed that the health among children who had been victims of any form of online sexual abuse was worse than among other children. The abuse had affected their health.

What the national survey tells us about the consequences of online abuse

Students who had been exposed to some form of sexual abuse demonstrated more symptoms of trauma than other students. The more severe the abuse that the student had suffered, the worse his/her symptoms tended to be. But those who knew that their abuse had been photographed or filmed (or who were unsure of whether it had been documented) experienced even worse health than other students who were victims of sexual abuse. The students who knew that their sexual abuse images had been disseminated had the lowest self-esteem and the worst mental health by far.

The symptom burden of different types of abuse (mean), according to the Trauma Symptom Checklist

No abuse	**Some abuse**	**Filmed/photographed abuse**	**Filmed/photographed abuse of which images were disseminated**
26,9	42,2	49,4	57,9

● *Symptoms according to the TSCC*

The students who responded that they had been subjected to persuasion or had felt pressured or forced into sexual contact on the internet differed from other students:

- *They had been exposed to other types of violence and sexual abuse far more often, and were significantly more likely to have received compensation for sex.*

- *They were more often victims of bullying (both online and offline).*

- *They had lower self-esteem and worse mental health than their peers. They were more anxious and experienced more symptoms of depression, anger, post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation and sexual anxiety.*

- *They were considerably more prone to self-harming and used sex to harm themselves more often than young people who had not been victims of online sexual abuse.[29,30]*

ONLINE AND OFFLINE COMMUNITIES

SCHOOL & LEISURE TIME

PEERS

FAMILY

INDIVIDUAL

1. Individual

- *Personality*
- *Self-esteem*
- *Risk factors e.g., physical or mental disability*
- *Previous exposure to violence and other difficult events*
- *Views on sexuality, gender roles and the sexual abuse of children*

2. The family

- *Relationship to family members before the abuse occurred*
- *Relationship to family members after the abuse occurred*
- *Openness*
- *Ability to handle stress*
- *Financial and practical resources*
- *Network (access to support)*
- *Support from the family following the revelation of abuse*
- *Views on sexuality, gender roles and the sexual abuse of children*

3. Peers

- *Relationship to peers*
- *Trust*
- *Culture of conversation*
- *Group climate*
- *Culture of silence*
- *Available adults*
- *Views on sexuality, gender roles and the sexual abuse of children*

4. School & Leisure Time

- *Professional support from school staff/people in leadership roles*
- *Forums for discussion*
- *Trust in professionals/people in leadership positions*
- *Work with establishing values systems*
- *Information*
- *Knowledge-based support/education*
- *Views on sexuality, gender roles and the sexual abuse of children*

5. Society offline and online

- *Mixed messages about how one should behave*
- *Sexualization in the public sphere*
- *Resources for support, collaboration, social actors, treatment*
- *Information*
- *Knowledge-based support/education*
- *Views on sexuality, gender roles and the sexual abuse of children*

Examples of different levels of factors that affect the health of children and young people in instances of online sexual abuse

The documentation in the form of photos/videos that is the result of online sexual abuse affects juvenile victims in different ways and at different levels. In the model below, we provide various examples.

Research shows that children's health is affected when sexual abuse is documented in text messages or images. In the model, we have also described how factors at different levels can prove to be of significance. At the individual level, many factors play a role – these can include personality and self-esteem as well as vulnerability due to disabilities or past exposure to violence or abuse. In the context of family, relationships with family members are important, but the emotional support a child receives, his/her ability to cope with stress, and the amount of personal and financial resources he/she has at his/her disposal also play a role in how a child deals with the situation.

Similarly, peers, school and leisure time are of great importance for how children feel when they have been subjected to abuses that were documented. Society in general plays a role, including with regard to the resources that are available for the investigation and treatment of abuse and access to information and knowledge, as well as when it comes to the social norms and messages that are conveyed within the public sphere. Perceptions of sexuality, gender, and the sexual abuse of children is an important factor on all these levels. Differing viewpoints yield different results; some will cause a child to feel supported and vindicated, while others lead to feelings of shame or guilt.

Because factors at various levels affect children's health when sexual abuse has been documented, it follows that children also require support at various levels. Children may be in need of individual psychotherapy or family therapy, and their parents may require support – or efforts may be needed as pertains to their age cohorts or school environment. The needs vary from individual to individual and can change over time. Combinations of various efforts are often necessary.

It is important to analyze and attempt to influence these factors at their respective levels, and preventive work is also crucial.

Disclosure is a starting point

A child or teen who has been abused does not always talk about what has happened. The incident may therefore remain a secret of which only the victim and the abuser are aware. But most children who have been subjected to abuse do tell someone. This provides a starting point for providing protection, support and treatment.

Information from the national survey.

- *The girls who had been victims of abuse were more likely to tell someone (70%) than the boys (51%). The students who had told someone about the abuse had most commonly confided in a peer.*

- *Only 1 percent of the girls who had disclosed the abuse had confided in someone via an online community or online chat support service. A larger proportion of boys (3.9%) had used such opportunities to talk about their abuse.* [31]

Things to keep in mind when meeting with children who have been abused

Abuse that occurred online or instances in which initial contact was made via the internet may have been carried out in a wide variety of different ways. It may be particularly important to learn about certain things in order to understand the forms of assistance and support the victim may require.

The relationship with the abuser

As with children and young people who are abused offline, victims of online abuse may have been exposed to the abuse by anyone from a stranger to someone they know well.

Children who are victims of abuse may fear social contacts and can be suspicious of new people. Might the next person they meet also be capable of doing them harm? If they've never seen the person who abused them, they may reflect extensively on who that person might have been, and may look at people in their immediate environment and wonder if any of them could be the person who harmed them.

For children who have been abused by someone they know, maybe even someone they love, the sense of betrayal is enormous. They may be afraid to trust the people to whom they are close, afraid to allow someone to get close to them again. These children may harbor great sadness and bottomless rage for the person(s) who betrayed them.

How does the child perceive his/her relationship to the abuser? Is the abuser perceived as purely evil and dangerous? Is the abuser someone who the child likes or loves? Does he/she have mixed emotions about the abuser?

Threats and violence

The sexual abuse of children can occur without intimidation or violence. Children can be persuaded or lured into performing sex acts that they are too young to consent to. But many instances of sexual abuse entail some form of threats and/or violence. Sometimes, the violence and intimidation actually cause the most harm.

Did the abuse cause the child pain? Was the child physically harmed? Was the child afraid of being injured or even killed? Did the abuse entail threats to injure or kill other people or pets? How dangerous does the child consider his/her abuser to be?

Personal activity

An incident of abuse may begin as an exciting and important online interaction that develops into riskier behavior. For example, a child may send or post nude photos (perhaps to more than one unknown persons) and this action may ultimately result in situations from which the child cannot extricate him/herself. Children may be forced to do things they don't want to do. Images can be disseminated without their consent.

A child who is subjected to abuse is never to blame for what transpired. Nonetheless, many victims are overcome by feelings of shame and guilt. Instances in which children are exposed to online sexual abuse, are often preceded by actions that the child made on his/her personal initiative. For example, the child may have been talking about sex online

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or may have taken nude photos and sent them to his/her abuser. When children who initially acted on their own initiative are abused, it is still never their fault. The responsibility always lies with the person who abused them, regardless of what actions the children themselves may have taken of their own accord. However, the degree to which children themselves initiate contact or seek out sex can be of relevance when assessing their need for protection and rehabilitation.

Some children are very active in seeking out destructive sexual contacts, both online and offline. Such children frequently exhibit other self-destructive behaviors; they may self-harm or use drugs. They often have a background of violence, sexual abuse and poor adult relationships, as well as low self-esteem and negative opinions of themselves. Engaging in risky behavior online may be a reaction or a symptom of what these children have previously been exposed to.

As long as there are adults who are interested in exposing children to abuse, there is a very high probability that such vulnerable children will be abused again and again. It still is not these children's fault if they are exposed to abuse. On the contrary, the argument could be made that adults who take the initiative to take advantage of children who are so obviously vulnerable and defenseless are even more culpable.

However, at-risk children are greatly helped when they receive support in taking care of themselves and guidance about how to protect themselves from obvious risks. They can also benefit from rehabilitation that helps them to process the previous violence and abuse that may have instigated their risky behavior.

Although children are often exposed to abuse on the internet in situations in which they seek out contact or express sexual curiosity, this is of course not always the case. Some children become victims without taking any risks at all. Children may be lured into risky situations or exposed to threats from which they cannot defend themselves.

Child's own activity when he/she had been a victim of online sexual abuse

Self-destructive and self-harming behaviour. Making contact and acting on his/her own initiative.

Active involvement. Taking risks without considering the consequences.

No personal initiative. Assaulted, deceived or threatened.
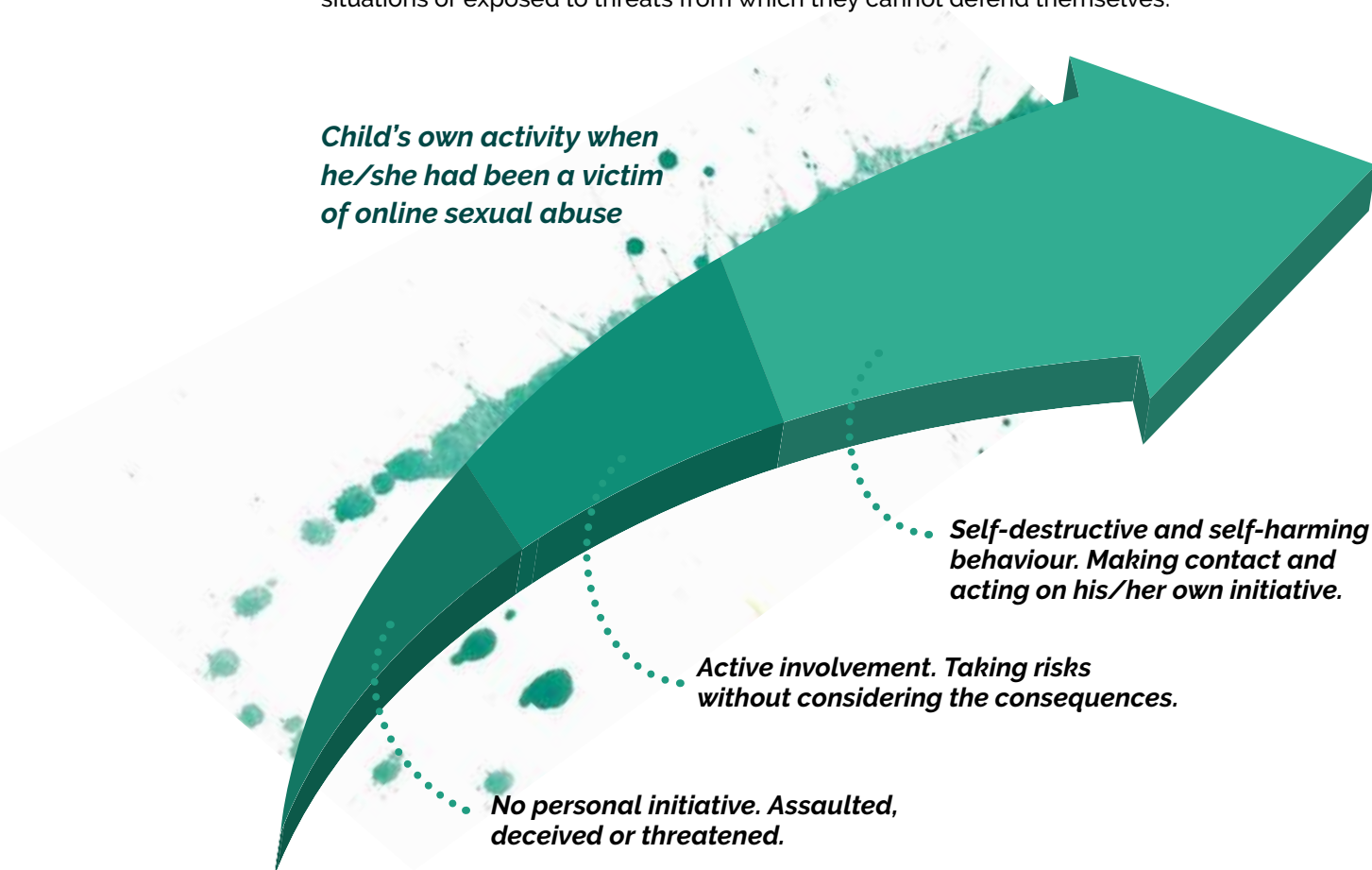
Example:

- *<u>No personal initiative.</u> Teodor's stepfather starts abusing him when he is still in preschool. His stepfather films the abuse and disseminates the videos online.*

- *<u>Active involvement.</u> Isabelle wants to get her hands on some alcohol. A man she meets online offers to give her and her friends free alcohol if they come to a party. She thinks that he is shady, but still goes to the party. At the party, she gets very drunk and is subjected to sexual abuse.*

- *<u>Self-destructive and self-harming behavior.</u> Maria's childhood has been marred by incidents of violence and abuse. She actively seeks out sexual contacts on the web, and ends up receiving compensation in exchange for sex. An online contact assaults and rapes her.*

At-risk children may feel worse about having been abused precisely because they somehow played an active role in what transpired. They may think that they made a mistake, that they consented, or that it's their own fault for being gullible or stupid. These perceptions can make it even more difficult to disclose what actually happened. They are afraid they will be blamed for doing something they knew was forbidden, or may simply think that what they've done is terribly embarrassing.

How actively did the abused child engage in risky behavior or seek out abusive situations? Does he/she blame his/herself for what happened? Is there a risk that he/she will take the initiative to make risky contacts or involve him/herself in situations that may lead to further abuse?

Deception

It's also easy for an online contact to pretend to be someone he/she is not. An adult can claim to be a teenager, a fashion photographer, a celebrity, or can present a multitude of other false personae. It is easy to send the victim photos of someone else and to pretend to be that more attractive person.

It is also possible to use flattery and compliments to deceive a victim, or to pretend to have strong feelings for a child when this is not the case. By persuading a child to talk about his/her interests, dreams, experiences, or fears, adults can use this knowledge against their victims and pretend they have something in common with the children they abuse.

It can be very painful for the child to discover that he/she has been deceived. The child may have been in love with someone who didn't actually love them back, and may come to realize that his/her adult abuser lied in order to persuade the child to have sex. Sometimes it's only when they become aware that same person has abused many other people that they understand that they have been hoodwinked.

Has the abused child been deceived? Does he/she blame his/herself for what happened?

Anxiety about the dissemination of images and other sensitive content

The fear that texts, photographs, and movies could be disseminated and shared with others (or the knowledge that this has occurred) can cause the abuse to have even more severe consequences. The idea that images could be disseminated to family, acquaintances, friends or enemies is terrifying for the victim. The idea that adult humans enjoy seeing images that document the abuse they have suffered is disgusting and disturbing. The child may feel that the incident of abuse is being repeated every time someone views these images.

Was the abuse documented? Have the images been disseminated?

Previous abuse

Children who are subjected to online sexual contact attempts or sexual abuse often have previous experiences of sexual abuse, physical abuse or bullying. The children who have experienced abuse on a multitude of levels are the ones who are at greatest risk of developing various forms of symptoms and illness. It is important to ask the child about his/her other experiences of abuse, bullying, or trauma. Children may also require protection, support and rehabilitation to cope with other things they have experienced. Their online abuse may even be a direct or indirect result of previous exposure to risks and negative influences — incidents in which the children were exposed to dangers, or were unable to foresee that they would occur. In such cases, it is all the more important that the children receive protection, support and rehabilitation so that the cycle of abuse can be broken.

Has the victim been exposed to other forms of abuse, violence or other difficult or traumatic events?

Disclosure

Most children who are victims of abuse tell someone what has happened — usually a peer. But only a small percentage of abuse is ever brought to the attention of the authorities. It is often necessary for the children themselves to choose to tell us what has happened or make the decision to inform social services or the police. In cases of online sexual abuse, it is relatively common that one or several children take the first step and alert someone, and that in the course of the ensuing investigation the police subsequently learn that many more victims are involved. This means that the other child victims might not be at all prepared or ready to share what they have been through. They may feel exposed, and can react strongly to being put in such a vulnerable situation.

When a report of abuse is filed and an investigation is initiated, the children involved in the case lose control of their own deeply personal stories; they can't control who knows what. When the police assigned to the investigation view videos or photographs, peruse the chat logs and gain insight into what has happened, they learn precisely what the victims have been trying to hide. As a rule, the children's' parents also learn what has transpired. This can be a good thing, but can also prove to be very difficult.

Who reported the abuse? How does the victim feel about the fact that the abuse has been revealed?

Inform!

Children are legally entitled to know their rights. They have the right to know what violence is, who they can turn to if they have been abused, and what protections and supports they will be entitled to if they choose to recount their experiences. The children the Children's Welfare Foundation has encountered have expressed a wish to receive such information from their parents, but have also emphasized that when the abuser is a parent or guardian, other adults must step in to educate them about their rights. They think preschools and schools are the best places to provide children with this information.

Under Article 39 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children who are victims of sexual abuse are legally entitled to rehabilitation and social reintegration. Different forms of help may be necessary to help children who have experienced abuse to feel better about what has happened to them. Adults who interact with children who have been abused must help them to gain access to the support and treatment that is right for them. Children and their parents have the right to receive information about the types of assistance that are available and how they can help.

There is a risk that the information provided to the groups of children that are most at risk of being exposed to violence will be of lesser quality than that which is provided to other children. Children who have developed their own difficulties as a result of the violence they suffered, children fleeing violence and living in secured accommodation with a parent, children with disabilities or chronic illnesses, and children who have been removed from their homes by social services — all these are examples of groups that may not receive the information they require. Perhaps these children do not attend school, or have special needs that demand that the information is specially formulated to suit their needs and abilities. The adults in these children's lives must ensure that information reaches them.

Ask!

Direct questions make it easier for children to tell you if they are being exposed to violence. It is often useful to combine information with a question.

> - *No one has the right to hurt a child. Nonetheless, many children have been mistreated by adults or by other children. Has that happened to you?*
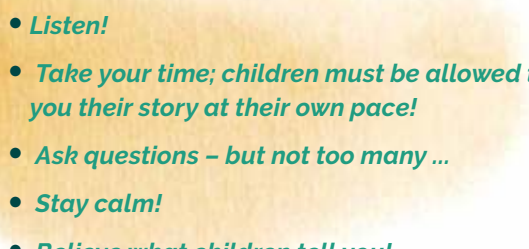
When there are indications that the child belongs to a group of children who are particularly vulnerable, it may be necessary to ask more detailed questions. Those who are working with the investigation or involved in the child's treatment may require a questionnaire regarding various difficult or traumatic events in order to shed light on the situation of the child.

> - *When children harm themselves and do not want to live, there can be many reasons behind these feelings and behaviors. However, in many cases someone has hurt them. Some children have been bullied, beaten or mistreated at home, or sexually abused. I would like you to tell me if that's the case for you. So I'm going to ask you questions about what you have been through.*

> - *You have told me that you have been sexually abused. When that is the case children may also have been involved in other difficult things with which they need help. I would like you to tell me if that's the case for you. So I'm going to ask you questions about other things that you may have been through.*

Listen, support, and raise the alarm!

If a child tells you that he/she is being exposed to violence, the first step is to calmly listen to what they have to say. Children the Children's Welfare Foundation has met have told us that it is hard for them when adults react strongly and get angry or sad about what they hear. Therefore, it is best if the adults working with the child set their own feelings aside and process them later, together with other adults.

With the help of children and young people, the Children's Welfare Foundation has created the site *www.dagsattprataom.se*. Children provide advice about what adults can do if they want children to feel like they can confide in them and feel able to talk about whether they have been sexually abused or been through any other difficult experiences.

- *Listen!*

- *Take your time; children must be allowed to tell you their story at their own pace!*

- *Ask questions – but not too many …*

- *Stay calm!*

- *Believe what children tell you!*

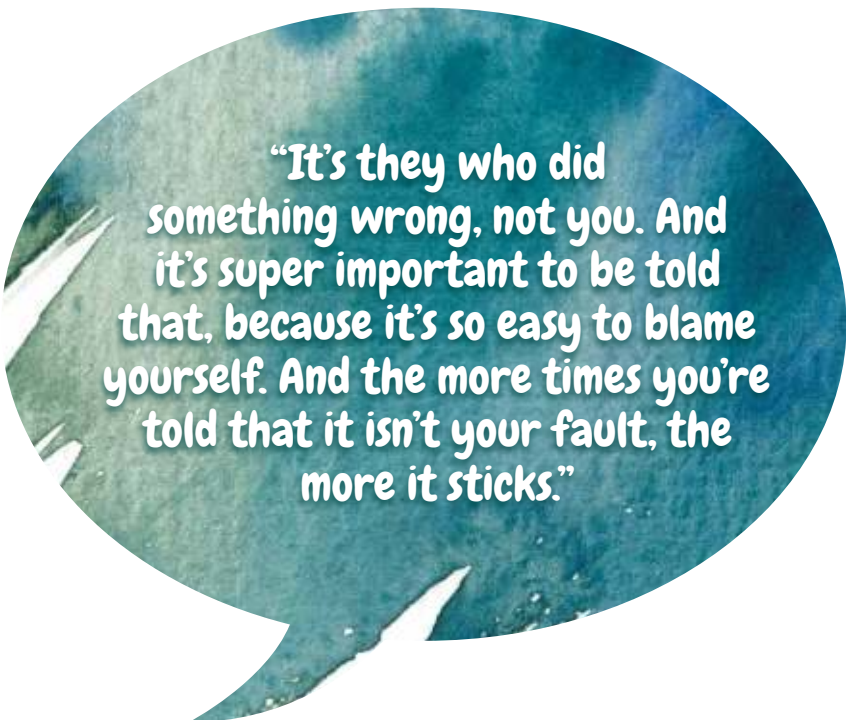The children also offer advice for adults working with children:

- *Show that you care and get personal!*

- *Explain who you are and what you can do!*

- *Children should get to speak with the same adult! Building trust takes time!*

- *Be honest, keep your promises, and don't gossip!*

- *The conversation environment is important!*

- *Take children seriously!*

Many children who have been sexually abused online have multiple vulnerabilities and have been through many different difficult events, including bullying, violence and abuse. The adults who investigate and treat such children must go the extra mile. It is important to identify how the children are doing and what else they have experienced. One cannot merely base one's assessment of their needs on the online abuse alone.

It is important to allow children to participate in structuring their assistance and treatment. It may be that the online abuse is far from being the most difficult thing for them to handle. Another vulnerability or the child's relationships with his/her age cohorts or family may be more problematic. In that case, one must start by dealing those issues.

When sexual abuse images have been disseminated or when the mere possibility exists that this could occur, children need help to deal with their concerns. The dissemination of such images can of course lead to rumor-spreading, bullying or continued vulnerability.

> *"It's they who did something wrong, not you. And it's super important to be told that, because it's so easy to blame yourself. And the more times you're told that it isn't your fault, the more it sticks."*

It is also important to always emphasize that the abuse is not the children's fault. Although they may have made mistakes, it is the abuser who is responsible for the abuse. Abuse victims are never to blame; it is their abusers who have done something wrong.

Often, adults need only listen and be supportive. It can be good for children to hear that what happened to them is wrong and that it is not their fault. The adult in whom a child confides may not necessarily be someone who can stop the violence or provide long-term support. But he/she can listen, be supportive for the time being, and pass the information on to others (i.e. parents, social services or the police).

Sometimes children talk about violence that has already ceased, and that has been reported and investigated. It may still be important for them to share what happened. Other times, they may talk about violence that is still going on, or about which they have never told anyone. If this is the case, then all adults who work with children have a legal obligation to pass this information on to social services by filing a report.

Private individuals are also encouraged to notify social services, but are not legally obligated to do so.

- *If you suspect a child is being mistreated: Contact social services!*

- *If you come upon an abusive incident while it is in progress or if the child is in immediate danger: Call 112!*

- *If you wish to report a crime to the police: Call the police or find a police station!*

The national survey

The report Unga, sex och Internet- I en föränderlig värld (referred to in this text as "the national survey") is the third major investigation of its kind to be carried out by the same research team. The previous investigations were carried out in 2004 and 2009. This structure makes it possible to make comparisons and observe developments over time. The study was conducted by researchers at Linköping and Lund universities at the behest of the Children's Welfare Foundation, and was funded by the government.[32]

Statistics Sweden selected a representative sample of schools. Some of the chosen schools are not included in the latest survey because they have been closed, or because they did not wish to participate or failed to respond. Participation was voluntary, and some students opted not take part in the study. A few students were not in school on the date on which the survey was conducted.

In total, 5,873 students from 171 schools participated. Students, teachers and principals received information about the study in the form of an informational letter. The letter also included information about where students could turn if they were in need of support and help. The students responded to the survey during class time, and the survey was administered by a responsible person selected by the school.

The survey included questions on a wide range of subjects and provides abundant information about the students who responded. The questions focused on socio-demographics (background factors such as age, sex, country of birth, economy and parental education level), sports, sexuality, experience with voluntary sex, alcohol and drug use, antisocial behavior, physical, mental and sexual abuse, experiences of treatment for psychiatric disorders, self-harming behavior, using sex to self-harm, selling sex, human trafficking, contact with social services, bullying, and internet, mobile phone, and pornography use.

The survey also included a number of standard evaluation devices that measure how students view their relationships with their parents, assess students' self esteem, and identify symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and self-harming behavior. In 2014, the young people who responded were in their junior year of high school. They ranged in age from 16 to 23, with an average age of just under 18. Slightly more girls than boys participated in the survey, and 0.9% of respondents did not feel that the categorization of boy/girl was an accurate way by which to define their gender. The latter group's answers were reported in some areas.

The study's results have been summarized more succinctly in *Det gäller en av fem- fakta om barn, sexuella övergrepp och sexuell exploatering i Sverige 2014.*[33]

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A Part of Reality

ON CHILDREN, SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE INTERNET

How common is online abuse? How is the health among children who have been abused? Can online abuse result in equally serious consequences as abuse that occurs offline?

In this report, we will summarize the results of various research studies. Much of the material is derived from a national study that was carried out by Linköping and Lund universities, within the framework of the mission that the Children's Welfare Foundation was assigned by the government. The purpose of this summary is to disseminate the study's most urgent research findings to a wider audience.

In Sweden, the internet is now part of reality for children and young people. They use it to play games, watch videos, listen to music, find out facts, read the news, buy and sell things, hang out, get to know new people, flirt, send messages, share photos and videos...

As with the rest of our daily lives, online life entails encounters with both good and bad phenomena. And just like in other arenas , children can be exposed to sexual abuse online, both by other children and young people and by adults. It is important that everyone who works with children learn more about internet-related abuse. nowledge is necessary to prevent these attacks and to help children who have been abused to obtain the protection and rehabilitation to which they are entitled.

Sexual abuse can and should be prevented, and preventative efforts must be based on knowledge and facts.

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