[Call for Inputs for the report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Children/Pages/cfi-Children-GA-report-2021.aspx)

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Children’s lives are increasingly mediated by digital technologies, yet when it comes to determining the long-term effects of internet use and online experiences on children’s well-being, mental health or resilience, the best we can do is make an educated guess. There is growing concern about children’s experiences of online risk related to content, contact, conduct and contract and the potential for harm online, particularly in relation to risks of sexual nature.

In response, as part of the [Global Kids Online](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/) project, and commissioned by UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) conducted a rapid evidence review aiming to identify the pathways to resilience and harm and the factors that can intensify risk or protect children. The review was published in early 2021. Please see <http://globalkidsonline.net/pathways-to-risk/>

Below we summarise the findings related to sexting, pornography, and sexual exploitation and abuse online (sexual solicitation online, sextortion, and intimate partner violence online), pointing to inequalities based on gender, sexuality, age, as well as on protective factors.[[1]](#footnote-1) We have focused here on the gender aspects of our much larger set of findings, and hope this is useful to your [important inquiry](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Children/Pages/cfi-Children-GA-report-2021.aspx). We will be happy to address any questions you may have.

1. **Exchanging sexual content (sexting)**

Sexting is defined as sending, receiving or exchanging self-produced sexualized content. This includes images, messages or videos sent or received through mobile phones, the internet or both.

**Key findings**

* The factors that predict a higher likelihood of sexting behaviour among children include gender (male), age (older), sexuality (LGBTQI) and socio-economic status (low).
* Girls are more likely than boys to receive and be asked for sexts from strangers, to have negative sexting experiences, and to be vulnerable to coercive sexting victimization.
* Psychological problems, reduced online safety and privacy, online sexual solicitations by adults, and offline risks (such as sexual interactions with adults and dating violence) are all associated with sexting.

Gender, age, sexuality and socio-economic status are among the factors that predict sexting behaviour among children. Studies find that boys, non-heterosexual children, older teenagers and children from a lower socio-economic background are more likely to engage in sexting.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, there is evidence that girls are more likely to be asked for sexts, to receive sexts from strangers[[3]](#footnote-3) and to have more negative sexting experiences.[[4]](#footnote-4) Girls are also more vulnerable to coercive sexting victimization[[5]](#footnote-5) and to having their self-produced sexual content sent to other people without their consent.[[6]](#footnote-6) Boys and older children aged 14–15 years are more likely to coerce a partner to send messages with sexual content than girls aged 11–12 years.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Sexting practices are shaped by broader gender and cultural contexts. One study found that girls in the Netherlands (but not boys) who uploaded sexualized pictures of themselves on social media were more likely to engage in sexting than those who did not.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is related to their sexual self-concept of being sexually mature and efficacious and is moderated by their level of extroversion and the volume of sexual media they consume.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Qualitative research with children further highlights the gendered nature of the risk that comes with sexting. Boys are culturally perceived as entitled to take pleasure in viewing sexual (nude) images of girls as a way of fitting in with their peers.[[10]](#footnote-10) On the other hand, the unauthorized distribution of nude images of girls has a more damaging impact on the girls’ reputations, leading to them being stigmatized or “slut-shamed”.[[11]](#footnote-11) Children often place the responsibility for mitigating the risk from sexting on the person sending the sexts, especially when this is a girl.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Sexting is associated with higher levels of depression, impulsiveness and vulnerability to stress,[[13]](#footnote-13) emotional problems,[[14]](#footnote-14) as well as suicidal thoughts and behaviours.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. **Viewing sexual content online**

Viewing sexual content online includes exposure to pictures or videos of sexually explicit material, such as nudity and people having sex, including pornography. Pornography is specifically defined as sexually explicit media intended for sexual arousal.

**Key findings**

* Children view sexual content online to learn about sex but tend to see men’s dominance and violent behaviours against women. Boys are more likely than girls to view such content.
* Children who are more interested in sex are also more likely to view sexual content online. They are also more likely to have experiences of risky sexual activities, such as casual sex, sexual sensation-seeking and exposure to unwanted sexual solicitation. This suggests multiple vulnerabilities and risk of harm for some children.

In the studies reviewed here, boys had greater exposure than girls to sexual content online, as is the case with other online sexual activities.[[16]](#footnote-16) Children who view sexual content online tend to believe that they can learn something from it and are more likely to view online pornography. They are more likely to engage in other sex-related activities, such as casual sex or engaging in sexual sensation-seeking. They are also more prone to have instrumental attitudes towards sex, meaning that they perceive sex as a core instrument for sexual gratification, and to be exposed to unwanted sexual solicitation. They are more apt to meet face to face with someone they first got to know online.[[17]](#footnote-17)

A study in Australia that explored the content children are exposed to when watching sexual content online revealed that significantly more children see men’s pleasure, men’s dominance and men’s violent behaviours against women than vice versa.[[18]](#footnote-18) It also found that girls are more likely than boys to recognize violence against women in pornography. These findings are concerning, given the evidence that children use pornography to learn about sex.[[19]](#footnote-19) Still, the findings explain the associations, among boys, between viewing pornography and having sexually aggressive behaviour and holding negative gender attitudes.[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. **Sexual exploitation and abuse online**

Sexual exploitation and abuse includes all acts of child sexual abuse, child prostitution, production or dissemination of child sexual abuse materials, child corruption (the intentional causing, for sexual purposes, of a child, to witness sexual abuse or sexual activities) and solicitation of children for sexual purposes.[[21]](#footnote-21) These acts can take place virtually but can be preceded or accompanied by or can develop into exploitation offline.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Key findings**

* Online sexual exploitation and abuse are linked to a combination of factors related to three areas, namely the digital context (online activities and skills), child-related factors (gender, age, well-being, offline risks) and the social context (factors related to family, peers and community).
* Children who are more vulnerable offline, perhaps because they are exposed to violence and have less protection and support, are also more vulnerable online.

Online victimization can create real risks for the offline victimization of children. Being asked to do something sexual online is a strong predictor of children meeting in person, for sexual purposes, an adult they first got to know online.

In assessing the risk factors, the studies mainly focus on three areas. The first is the digital context, which covers children’s online activities and, occasionally, skills. The second area deals with child-related factors, such as gender and age, well-being and offline behaviour, for example, sensation-seeking, risk-taking and experiences of violence. The third is the social context, which covers factors related to family, peers and community. An overall conclusion, supported by all 22 studies, is that online sexual exploitation and abuse are linked to a combination of factors across all three areas, but that children who are more vulnerable offline, perhaps because they are exposed to violence and have less protection and support, are also more vulnerable online.

Children who are at a higher risk of victimization tend to be female, older teenagers, LGBTQI children and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. They are also more likely to have experienced other forms of online and offline violence, to lack social support and to engage in risky online behaviour, such as posting personal information or pictures online and chatting to strangers. Factors not significantly related to online sexual exploitation and abuse include children’s self-esteem, the number of people on their contact lists, and the use of and length of time spent on social networking sites.[[23]](#footnote-23)

There is a range of protective factors identified in this literature in relation to online sexual exploitation and abuse, including enabling parental mediation, help-seeking and the ability to recognize violence in personal relationships.

* 1. **Sexual solicitation online**

Sexual solicitation, also referred to as ‘grooming’, denotes the process of establishing a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of information and communication technologies to facilitate online or offline sexual contact.[[24]](#footnote-24) Online sexual solicitation refers to requests to a child to share personal sexual information or engage in sexual activities or sexual talk through digital technologies.

**Key findings**

* Girls and older teenagers are more likely to be victims of online sexual solicitation, according to most studies (but there are exceptions).
* Being subjected to online sexual solicitation is associated with online risk behaviours, including exposure to online pornography, posting personal information or pictures online, having unknown people as friends on social media, voluntary sexting, video chatting with strangers, time spent online on weekdays (but not on weekends), and high levels of gaming.
* There is a connection between being vulnerable offline and online. Online sexual solicitation is correlated with offline exposure to violence, neglect, physical punishment, psychological victimization, parental conflict, sexual harassment and sexual solicitation.
* Perpetrators are a mixture of strangers and people known to the child. Perpetrators of online sexual solicitation are less likely to be known to the child than perpetrators of face-to-face sexual abuse.
* Social support can act as a protective factor. Children who lack such social resources face a double disadvantage: they are more likely to experience online sexual solicitation and less likely to seek help.

The publications indicated that 12 to 17% those surveyed had been subjected to sexual solicitations by an adult, and 13 to 28% had received unwanted sexual solicitations, regardless of the age of the perpetrator. The differences are likely to be related to both methodological approaches and country specificities. The majority of the studies in the review found that girls experience online sexual solicitation (unwanted or not specified) more often than boys, including in Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.[[25]](#footnote-25) But in some contexts, such as Taiwan Province of China, boys are more likely than girls to experience online sexual solicitation.[[26]](#footnote-26) In Malaysia, both genders are equally likely to be subjected to online sexual solicitation,[[27]](#footnote-27) and boys are sometimes found to be more likely than girls to be perpetrators of unwanted sexual solicitation.[[28]](#footnote-28)

A few studies explore how sexual solicitation experiences vary by children’s age. There is some evidence from two studies in Spain[[29]](#footnote-29) which suggests that age is an important factor. This research found that children aged 15–17 years were significantly more likely to receive requests to engage in sexual activities or in sexual talk, or to give out personal sexual information than their younger peers aged 12–13 years. Age and gender were also found to be important factors by a German study with children aged 14–17 years, which looked at their online sexual interactions with adults and peers. These interactions included having a sexual conversation, exchanging pictures, and cyber-sex.[[30]](#footnote-30) The study found that half (51%) of children had engaged in some type of online sexual activity. While this activity mostly involved peers, about one in five children in this study had had a sexual interaction with an adult. Of the children who engage in online sexual activities, about one in five have experiences of being solicited for sexual purposes. Overall, only 6% their sexual interactions with peers and 10% such interactions with adults are perceived as negative. This study found that the children experiencing online sexual solicitation were more likely to be girls, older teenagers, gay or bisexual, not living with both parents, of a foreign nationality and lacking in social support.[[31]](#footnote-31)

A study in Malaysia of 3,349 children aged 12–17 years[[32]](#footnote-32) shows that slightly more than half of the children who were in contact with an unknown person online were invited to a face-to-face meeting and that 59% these children went to this meeting. Boys are more likely to meet people face to face, as are children who go online in internet cafés, view pornography online and disclose personal information on the internet. Not being explicitly forbidden by parents to meet strangers or to use certain websites and chat rooms also increases the likelihood of meeting people offline.

There is very little research on the effects of sexual solicitation on children and on the protective factors. Depressive symptoms are significantly positively associated with online sexual solicitation, according to studies with children in Spain and Taiwan Province of China,[[33]](#footnote-33) but this association was found only among girls in Sweden.[[34]](#footnote-34) Low levels of help-seeking (reporting experiences of illicit solicitation to friends, parents or a helpline) are associated with higher rates of online sexual solicitation.[[35]](#footnote-35) Children who have stronger social support from parents and friends[[36]](#footnote-36) are more likely to show protective behaviour and seek help after experiencing online sexual solicitation. Parenting plays a key role in protecting children. A recent cross-sectional study conducted across six countries shows that instructive parental mediation is negatively related to being a victim of online sexual solicitation among children aged 12–17 years, while restrictive mediation predicts higher levels of victimization.[[37]](#footnote-37)

* 1. **Sextortion**

Sexual extortion, sometimes referred to as ‘sextortion’ is the threatened dissemination of images of a sexual nature without consent, usually to exact revenge or procure benefits such as additional images, sexual acts or money.[[38]](#footnote-38)

**Key findings**

* Sextortion usually occurs within existing relationships (romantic or friendship) and much less by among people unknown to each other. Children involved in offending are also more likely to be victims of sextortion.
* The data on sextortion are mostly inconclusive, with large variation between studies. According to the studies in our sample, boys are more likely to be involved in sextortion than girls, both as victims and perpetrators, but are less likely to tell anyone about it.[[39]](#footnote-39) Victims are more likely to be non-heterosexual. There are no differences based on age and race.

Unlike other forms of sexual exploitation, where girls tend to be the victims, sextortion victims are more likely to be boys and to be non-heterosexual. Boys are also more likely than girls to target others. The study found no difference in sextortion experiences by race and no consistent difference concerning age, except that 15-year-olds are generally more likely to be involved compared with children of other ages.

The victims of sextortion experience a range of harms, such as being stalked or harassed (10% boys and 24% girls), being contacted repeatedly online or over the phone (43% boys and 41% girls) or having a fake profile created in their name (11% boys and 9% girls). In about one in four cases, the sextortion results in the sharing of the image with someone else without permission.

According to the study by Patchin and Hinduja (2018), boys are significantly less likely to tell someone, including a parent, the police or their school, about a sextortion incident. Only 35% report it, compared with 47% girls. When boys do tell someone, they most often turn to a friend (45%), compared with 39% girls. Girls most often turn to their parent (42%), compared with 29% boys. Very few sextortion victims report the incident to the site or app on which it occurred (5% boys and 7% girls).

* 1. **Intimate partner violence online**

Intimate partner violence online is broadly defined as abusive behaviour, such as harassment, control or stalking, within a sexual relationship or by a dating partner, facilitated by technology.[[40]](#footnote-40) It is included here due to the important gender dimensions.

**Key findings**

* Girls are more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence, as are children transitioning to adolescence, those in a heterosexual relationship, those who have a wider age gap with their partner and those who have experienced bullying victimization or perpetration.
* Adverse childhood experiences, such as exposure to violence, abuse and other trauma, and risk-taking, such as alcohol binge drinking for boys and early and unsafe sex for girls, are risk-predicting factors.
* Girls are more negatively affected by the experience of intimate partner violence than boys and are more likely to be monitored or pressured by their partner.
* Parental involvement, such as monitoring and emotional bonding, can be a protective factor in relation to intimate partner violence online. But there is no association with family and peer support, community engagement among children or school connectedness.

The evidence suggests that girls are more likely to be the victims of intimate partner violence, as are those who are younger than their partner, those in a heterosexual relationship and those who have experience of bullying victimization or perpetration.[[41]](#footnote-41) Girls are more likely to be sent too many messages that make them feel uncomfortable, to be pressured to share passwords or respond quickly to calls or texts, or to have their messages, whereabouts and activities monitored by their partner.[[42]](#footnote-42) A wider age gap between the partners and being the victim of such electronic intrusion are associated with a higher likelihood of perpetration. Girls are also more negatively affected by the experience than boys.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Gender plays an important role in relation to predictive risk factors. A study with children and young people in Belgium aged 16–22 years who had been victims of cyber-dating abuse found that male victims were significantly more likely to have engaged in alcohol binge drinking, while girls were more likely to have been sexually active at a younger age and to have had unprotected sex.[[44]](#footnote-44) Another study, which tested the relationship between family, school- and community-level factors and various forms of cyber-dating aggression among children in the United States, found that gender (male) predicts coercive sexting but not cyber-stalking or online harassment.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Perpetration of intimate partner and cyber-dating violence is, overall, more common among children transitioning to adolescence and those from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds, according to a United States-based study. As with online sexual solicitation, offline vulnerability and parenting are significant factors predicting victimization and protection. Adverse childhood experiences, such as exposure to violence, abuse and other trauma, significantly predict higher rates of cyber-dating aggression perpetration.[[46]](#footnote-46) Parental involvement in the form of parental monitoring and emotional bonding is significantly associated with a lower likelihood of perpetration of all forms of cyber-dating aggression. Perceived safety of the community predicts lower levels of cyber-stalking only. There is no association between intimate partner or cyber-dating violence and family and peer support, community engagement among children or school connectedness.[[47]](#footnote-47)

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36. DeMarco et al., 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Wachs et al., 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. United Nations, 2019; Patchin and Hinduja, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. some studies find that girls are more likely to be sextortion victims. See, for example: https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/ sextortion. Such differences may be due to reporting, measurement or local differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Smith-Darden et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Backe et al., 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Backe et al., 2018; Hellevik and Øverlien, 2016; Reed et al., 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Reed et al., 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hellevik and Øverlien, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Van Ouytsel et al., 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Smith-Darden et al., 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Smith-Darden et al., 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Smith-Darden et al., 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)