

*Submission to the [call for input](#) on
 “Existing and Emerging Sexually Exploitative Practices against Children in the Digital Environment” by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children*

Submission by: Global Kids Online

[Global Kids Online](#) (GKO) is committed to generating cross-nationally comparable and robust evidence that reflects children’s voices, experiences and concerns directly. It is a collaboration between the [London School of Economics and Political Science \(LSE\)](#), [UNICEF’s Office of Research – Innocenti](#), and the [EU Kids Online network](#). Global Kids Online works with UNICEF country offices and/or academic partners in [Albania](#), [Argentina](#), [Brazil](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Canada](#), China, [Chile](#), Costa Rica, [Ghana](#), India, [Montenegro](#), [New Zealand](#), Peru, the [Philippines](#), [Serbia](#), [South Africa](#), and [Uruguay](#). Launched in 2015, Global Kids Online has surveyed over 40,000 children and 20,000 of their caregivers primarily in low-middle income countries– making it one of the most comprehensive evidence-generation project on children’s internet use globally.

For this report, we present primary data from internet-using 12-17 year-olds who took part in the [Disrupting Harm research project](#) focused specifically on different forms of violence, including online sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. The research was conducted from 2019 to 2022 in [Cambodia](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Indonesia](#), [Kenya](#), [Malaysia](#), [Mozambique](#), [Namibia](#), [Philippines](#), [South Africa](#), [Tanzania](#), [Thailand](#), [Uganda](#) and [Vietnam](#).

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I. Introduction

We are pleased to provide input into the Special Rapporteur’s forthcoming report, drawing on our research expertise to explicate how technologies are being used to facilitate the sexual exploitation and abuse of children¹ (UN RQ1), and to offer practical recommendations for stakeholders who are responsible for making child online safety a reality, such as governments, the technology industry and online service providers² (UN RQ2).

This submission provides evidence that:

- Children’s exposure to sexual images online varies considerably across countries
- In many countries, children are more likely to be subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse through social media than in online games or in-person
- Most online sexual contact is between peers, consensual and viewed positively by the teenagers concerned
- Age, gender, socio-economic status, self-efficacy and psychological difficulties affect how strongly children experience harm from online sexual risk
- Children who encounter one type of online risk are more likely to also encounter others, with vulnerable or disadvantaged children particularly prone to being upset
- Gaining digital skills brings opportunities but also risks, so skills – on their own – are insufficient to keep children safe online
- The child rights community has proposed multiple tools, ranging from Child Rights Impact Assessment, best interests determination, child participation, evidence-gathering, restorative and rehabilitative approaches and more, as set out in General comment No. 25. These need to be widely and effectively deployed.

II. Definitions

We refer to “children” for those who are under 18, and “young people” for those 18 to 25. Our evidence regarding online sexual abuse and exploitation draws on two research projects: Global Kids Online³ and EU Kids online.⁴ We also refer to the Luxembourg terminology guidelines.⁵

Online Child Sexual Abuse	The term “online child sexual abuse” refers both to the sexual abuse of children that is facilitated by ICTs (i.e., online grooming) and to sexual abuse of children that is committed elsewhere and then repeated by sharing it online through, for instance, images and videos (the point at which it becomes exploitation)
Online Child Sexual Exploitation	Online child sexual exploitation includes all acts of a sexually exploitative nature carried out against a child that have, at some stage, a connection to the online environment. It includes any use of ICTs that results in sexual exploitation or causes a child to be sexually exploited, or that results in or causes images or other material documenting such sexual exploitation to be produced, bought, sold, possessed, distributed, or transmitted.

¹ Global Kids Online (2024).

² 5Rights Foundation (2024); Digital Futures Commission (2024)

³ Kardefelt-Winther, D. & Saeed, M. (2022).

⁴ Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S., and Hasebrink, U. (2020).

⁵ Interagency Working Group (2016).

III. Emergence of online sexual exploitation and abuse

Recent technological and social changes have dramatically reconfigured the digital landscape for all internet users, increasing the benefits derived from being online and also the associated risk of harm. At the same time, the more societies become connected, the more a lack of connection presents a problem for those who are excluded.⁶ For example, during the global health pandemic, children’s digital access significantly determined not only whether they could continue their education but also whether they could access quality information. Further, with over 1.5 billion children across 190 countries confined to their homes, active video games or dance videos provided an opportune chance to exercise,⁷ bringing health benefits, though children were also exposed to content risks, including sexually provocative imagery on social media sites.⁸

Sexual objectification through images and videos can occur in many ways. In the United Kingdom, TikTok is now used by 43% of 3–17-year-olds.⁹ A study of internet sensation Charli D’Amelio – the first TikTok influencer to reach 100 million followers – found that such influencers narrow the possibilities for online participation and identity by promoting a culture of spectacular visibility that proscribes a ‘desired self.’¹⁰ In the aforementioned case, the influencer has amassed more than eleven billion likes often by posting short and scantily clad dance routines in her bedroom. Such videos serve to both ‘feed’ content to child audiences and offer a blueprint for popular success.

The media play a crucial role in nourishing the imagination about sex and sexuality; through observation, children learn to adopt both the sexual behaviors they see modelled in popular entertainment content, as well as the sexual scripts and responses that are accessible in chatrooms and the comment sections of social media. Gaining knowledge about sex, sexuality and sexual identities is a normal part of growing up, child development and self-knowledge. Children may enjoy learning about these issues and even intentionally seek out sexually explicit content.

The key challenge for the UN Special Rapporteur is to recognise the cultural and social context in which such practices emerge to pinpoint when intervention is required. This must be done at a time when new digital risks are ever-evolving and growing exponentially:

Increases in livestreaming, ephemeral media, and messaging platforms, as well as the development of virtual reality technology, have changed the dynamics of online sexual interaction and, consequently, the dynamics of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TA-CSA), unwanted peer-to-peer sexual conduct, and the production and distribution of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The COVID-19 pandemic saw changes in children’s and adults’ online usage, as evidenced in reports of increases in TA-CSA and the amount of CSAM being detected, particularly first-person produced sexual imagery.¹¹

⁶ Livingstone, S., Helsper, E.J., & Rahali, M. (2022).

⁷ Kardefelt-Winther, D., Twesigye, R., Zlámál, R., Saeed, M., Smahel, D., Stoilova, M., and Livingstone, S. (2020).

⁸ Livingstone, S., & Stoilova, M. (2021).

⁹ Ofcom (2023).

¹⁰ Rahali, M. (2023).

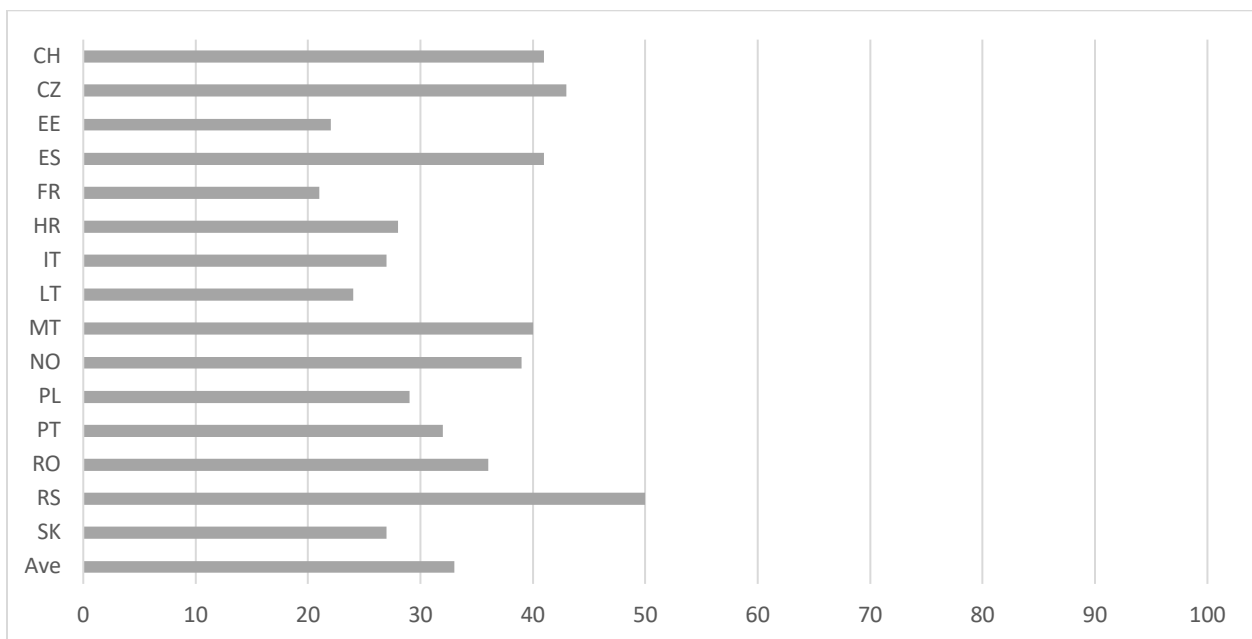
¹¹ Bryce, J., Livingstone, S., Davidson, J., Hall, B., and Smith, J. (2023, p.72).

IV. The role of media and technology in facilitating sexual exploitation and abuse in the digital environment

There is a relationship between online sexual harms and age of first exposure to social media – research in the United States has shown that the rate of online harms peaks when children start using social media.¹² The exposure of children to sexualised images online has been the topic of many policy debates and interventions in the field of internet safety, complicated by cultural variations in the judgement of what constitutes pornography or ‘sexual(ised)’ imagery.

The EU Kids Online survey found that children’s exposure to sexual images on a mobile phone, computer, tablet or any other online device varies by nation (see Figure 1).¹³

Figure 1: Seeing sexual images, by country



QF30 In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER SEEN any sexual images? Percentage of children who answered yes.
Base: All children 9–16 who use the internet.

Further, the exposure varies by age and gender. More children in the oldest age category reported seeing sexual images online than those in the youngest age category.¹⁴ In all of the countries surveyed by EU Kids Online, more girls than boys reported being upset by seeing sexual images. Promisingly, research has found that girls use more proactive strategies (such as changing privacy settings, blocking the person, or deleting images or messages) when dealing with shocking images, strangers, sexting, and sexual images.¹⁵

The Disrupting Harm research project (a survey questionnaire adapted from Global Kids Online, 2022)¹⁶ used the following indicators to measure online sexual exploitation and abuse of children:

¹² Parents Together (2023).

¹³ Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S., and Hasebrink, U. (2020).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Vandoninck, S. & d’Haenens, L. (2015).

¹⁶ Kardefelt-Winther, D. & Saeed, M. (2022).

1. Someone offered you money or gifts online in return for sexual images or videos
2. Someone offered you money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual
3. Someone shared sexual images of you without your consent
4. Someone threatened or blackmailed you online to engage in sexual activities

Children in selected global South countries reported that they were most likely to be subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse through social media (see Table 1).

Table 1: Where children experience online sexual exploitation and abuse (GKO, 2022)

	ET	KE	MZ	NA	TZ	UG	KH	IN	MY	PH	TH	VN
Social Media	37%	67%	55%	73%	71%	53%	40%	41%	55%	50%	72%	71%
In person	32%	27%	35%	40%	29%	34%	35%	18%	13%	16%	40%	25%
Online game	28%	18%	16%	22%	35%	20%	27%	18%	18%	16%	65%	14%
Other	29%	23%	16%	17%	18%	26%	16%	23%	16%	13%	33%	0%
Prefer not to say	11%	8%	13%	7%	0%	9%	12%	18%	18%	16%	19%	29%
Don't know	34%	8%	10%	16%	12%	8%	33%	18%	32%	31%	11%	0%
ET-Ethiopia, KE-Kenya, MZ-Mozambique, NA- Namibia, TZ- Tanzania, UG-Uganda, KH- Cambodia, IN-Indonesia, MY-Malaysia, PH-Philippines, TH-Thailand, VN- Vietnam Base: Internet-using 12-17-year-olds who were subjected to at least one form of OCSEA in the past year. (n= 1,056)												

In addition to age and gender, factors such as socio-economic status, self-efficacy and psychological difficulties affect how strongly children experience harm.¹⁷

“I was really upset when the guy sent me pornographic pictures”. Girl, 12–14, Ghana¹⁸

The EU Kids Online research found that:

- Girls feel more upset than boys when they experience sexting
- Younger children (aged 11–12) are more upset by sexual images and sexting
- Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more upset by sexual images and cyberbullying
- Children with low self-efficacy are more upset by cyberbullying and sexting
- Children with more psychological difficulties are more upset by all risks than children with fewer difficulties¹⁹
- Individual characteristics make a difference to the coping strategies children choose

¹⁷ Haddon, L., Cino, D., Doyle, M-A., Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., & Stoilova, M. (2020).

¹⁸ Livingstone, S., Kardefelt Winther, D., and Hussein, M. (2019).

¹⁹ Vandoninck, S., d’Haenens, L., & Roe, K. (2013).

Online vulnerabilities

Analysis of country data from EU Kids Online found that in Norway, previous experience of cyberbullying had the greatest adverse impact on children experiencing unwanted online sexual communication. More generally, children who encounter one risk are more likely to encounter others,²⁰ with vulnerable children, such as children with special needs and disabilities, and LGBTQ+ children, particularly likely to be upset and experience a negative spiral.

For many children, their negative online experiences were implicated in the development of their mental health difficulties. For instance, experiencing online sexual abuse, unwanted sharing of pictures of sexual content or online bullying appears to lead to negative self-worth, depression or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Research shows that for children and young people who were not able to disclose these experiences and receive adequate help, the long-lasting consequences appeared more severe, affecting their school performance, social life, leisure activities and wellbeing.²¹

Other research shows that the consequences of online sexual abuse may be exacerbated when pictures and videos are widely distributed because of the permanence and ease of accessibility of the images, leaving the victim in a constant state of fear and vulnerability. High rates of low self-esteem, delinquency, substance abuse, behavioural problems, difficulties at school and depressive symptomatology have been found in children and young adults engaged in online sexual activity.²²

Digital skills acquisition

Oftentimes, skills and digital literacy are viewed as the solution to children's exposure to online risks. However, recent research shows that it is more complicated: gaining digital skills brings opportunities, but also risks.²³ As such skills – on their own – are insufficient to keep children safe online.

Survey findings also suggest that the different dimensions of digital skills can play different roles. Results from a three-wave longitudinal study in selected European countries show that being upset after intended exposure to sexual content was lower for children with higher communication and interaction skills, technical and operational skills, or content creation and production skills.²⁴

Generally, in Europe, greater digital skills allow for more effective coping strategies that protect against harm to wellbeing.²⁵ Globally, too, digital skills have been positively linked to coping behaviours online (such as privacy behaviour, deleting unwelcome messages and blocking senders). More digitally literate children were more likely to delete messages and block senders when experiencing cyberbullying or unwelcome sexting, whereas children with fewer skills were more upset and less able to cope with sexual images.²⁶

²⁰ Kardefelt Winther, D., Stoilova, M., Büchi, M., Twesigye, R., Smahel, D., Livingstone, S., Bedrosová, M., & Kvardová, N. (2023).

²¹ Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M., Stänicke, L. I., Jessen, R. S., Graham, R., Staksrud, E., & Jensen, T. K. (2022).

²² Jonsson, L. S., Fredlund, C., Priebe, G., Wadsby, M., & Svedin, C. G. (2019).

²³ Stoilova, M., Rahali, M. & Livingstone, S. (2023).

²⁴ Machackova, H., Jaron Bedrosova, M., Tolochko, P., Muzik, M., Waechter, N., & Boomgaarden, H. (2023).

²⁵ Vissenberg, J., d'Haenens, L., & Livingstone, S. (2022).

²⁶ Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., & Stoilova, M. (2023).

V. Policy and legislative practice

International research studies suggest that most online sexual contact is between peers, consensual and viewed positively by the teenagers concerned.²⁷ On the one hand, sending and receiving sexual messages via electronic devices can be a form of intimate peer interaction, experienced as positive for both the sender and receiver. On the other hand, there are legitimate fears that some forms of sexting are facilitated by grooming efforts by adults, or are the result of sexually abusive behaviour, including intimate digital partner violence.

When the internet and mobile phones play such a substantial part in children's daily lives, then also flirting, exploration of sexuality and the establishment and maintenance of intimate relationships can be facilitated by technology. In the research cited here, some participants are above the age of sexual consent age while others are below. When considering preventive efforts and creating good policy and legislative practice, it is important to understand the different types of sexting that occur, and to evaluate the degree to which this constitutes a risk of serious harm.²⁸

As such, 'best interests' determination is necessary for decision-making where there are competing potential responses for upholding children's rights, or when it appears that children's rights are in tension, or the declared interests of other parties may conflict with those of children.²⁹ Notably, when considering the enjoyment and implementation of the human rights of children, including in relation to the digital environment, there is frequently a real or perceived tension between children's agency – exemplified by UNCRC (1989)³⁰ Articles 5 and 12, as well as the fundamental freedoms set out in Articles 13-15 – and rights to protection from harm and exploitation. Specifically, children have the right to access information and to express opinions 'through any media' (13); on the other hand, they have the right to privacy (16), and to be protected from sexual exploitation (34).

UN General comment No. 25 (2021)³¹ explains how the Convention can be implemented in relation to the digital environment regarding children's best interests (paras 12-13), evolving capacities (19-21), non-discrimination (9-11), meaningful access (4), privacy (67-78), safety (14) and development (104-105).

Yet a gap remains in legislation to simultaneously protect against child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation while enabling consensual sexual practices. Despite several decades of policies related to online child protection, unevenness in implementation, the application of penalties intended for adults but applied to minors, and the complex nature of the internet and children's use of it means that better informed and holistic approaches to policy and provision are urgently needed, tailored to meet the specificities of the cultural climate in individual countries and regions.³²

²⁷ Livingstone, S., & Smith, P. K. (2014).

²⁸ Children Online: Research and Evidence. (2023).

²⁹ Livingstone, S., Cantwell, N., Özkul, D., Shekhawat, G., & Kidron, B. (2024).

³⁰ United Nations (1989).

³¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2021).

³² United Nations General Assembly. (2020).

V. Recommendations

<p>Research and development</p>	<p>Child-centred research methods³³ Future research should investigate possible harm caused by receiving sexual messages or unwanted requests for sexual information and its impact on children’s well-being. This includes, for instance, examining which platforms are used for sexting, who sends the message(s) and how children cope with such an experience. More research should be done on the types of posts and content that invite further comment or sexual solicitation.</p> <p>It is necessary to understand in greater depth the substance of children’s experiences; as per General comment No. 25, the collection of robust, comprehensive data should be adequately disaggregated by age, sex, religion, disability, geographical location, ethnic and national origin and socioeconomic background.</p>
<p>Social media and influencers</p>	<p>Monitor scope and scale of messages and campaigns Evidence demonstrates that children are most likely subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse through social media.³⁴ Platforms can and should minimize or eliminate the volume of posts shown to children whose primary objective or intent is coded as sexual objectification, or contains mature sexual themes.</p> <p>While the role of online influencers is to sell the ‘self’, they can play a critical role in promoting body- and sex- positive messages, raising social awareness for online protection and participating in campaigns to protect themselves and their followers from harassment and exploitation.</p>
<p>Practitioners</p>	<p>Facilitate reporting Liaise with stakeholders to ensure children know how and where to make a report or find support.³⁵ Some good examples are the efforts of Child Helpline International³⁶ and Insafe³⁷ to establish international evaluation models and standards to be used by helplines in their networks or evaluations that compare the effectiveness of different actors in relation to an issue, such as sexual exploitation and abuse.</p>
<p>Policymakers</p>	<p>Child’s Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA)³⁸ CRIA applies established methods of impact assessment to the goal of realising children’s rights as in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.</p> <p>An evidence-based approach should identify optimal measures to intervene and aid children. It is important to distinguish transgressive behaviours among children from sexual abuse and solicitation of children by adults, and to address both effectively, prioritising rehabilitative and restorative approaches for the former.</p> <p>Conceptualising sexual activity online as an inevitably negative experience may result in providing unheeded advice that does not apply to a child’s true lived experience. The challenge is to develop effective preventive strategies to protect children from the negative consequences of exploring sexuality online, while ensuring that such strategies stay situated within their age-appropriate development.</p>

³³ Stoilova, M., Livingstone, S., and Khazbak, R. (2021).

³⁴ Kardefelt-Winther, D. & Saeed, M. (2022).

³⁵ Stoilova, M. Livingstone, S., and Donovan, S. (2019).

³⁶ Child Helpline International and UNICEF (2017).

³⁷ Stoilova, M., Rahali, M. & Livingstone, S. (2023).

³⁸ Mukherjee, S., Pothong, K., & Livingstone, S. (2021).

Educators	<p>Digital skills development</p> <p>Digital skills impact on how children cope with risky situations. Children with better skills tend to engage in more proactive strategies that are more likely to solve the problem. By helping children gain digital skills, educators will enable children to better avoid harm by protecting themselves, coping with what they find and/or building digital resilience. Better digital skills are not linked to more harm, and may even reduce harm, possibly because children with better digital skills appear better able to cope with online risks.</p>
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