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ROBERT project summary for everyone

ROBERT project team



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Introduction

This summary for everyone is intended to be easy to read. In it we have included what we in the ROBERT project team thought was most important for those that are not researchers or that themselves work with young people.

The ROBERT project (Risk-taking Online Behaviour – Empowerment through Research and Training) has over a two year period: **i)** interviewed victims of online sexual abuse; **ii)** held focus groups with young people; **iii)** collected research on online sexual abuse of children and **iv)** interviewed perpetrators of online sexual abuse against children. The aim of the work is to understand how and why online contacts sometimes lead to sexual abuse or rape. The ROBERT project aims to raise the quality of the information available to young people on how to navigate safely online. We did this through interviewing young people that have been sexually abused online or offline but where the contact was taken or maintained online.

The focus groups conducted within the ROBERT project have included young people who have previously been considered to be more at risk of online abuse; young people with some form of disability, young lesbian, gay or transgender people and young people living in care.

Anyone interested to read more on the ROBERT project outcomes can access the four reports

Aknowledgements: The work in the ROBERT project has been made possible through co-funding from the EU Safer Internet Programme and through cooperation with numerous colleagues and organisations who generously shared their experiences and contacts with us. However, what we hope the reader of each ROBERT report will experience is the voices and views of all the young people that contributed with their accounts and their views. The ROBERT project is dedicated to them.

Recommendations

The ROBERT team consisting of researchers, child psychologists and psychiatrist, clinical social workers and NGO experts have, in consultation with child protection experts, law enforcement, pedagogical experts and child psychiatry developed the recommendations below. These should be seen as a complement to already existing general information on how to stay safe online.

These recommendations on keeping children safe online as well as offline are based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 13 specifically addresses the child's right to freedom in accessing information in any form and article 34 specifically addresses the right for the child to be protected from all forms of exploitation. Article 39 goes on to spell out that states must rehabilitate the child if such abuse and exploitation mentioned in article 34 does happen.

The EU Directive 2011/92 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography addresses the situation for children groomed online as does the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, the Lanzarote convention.

Young people should know that

- it is the online-only contacts that may become problematic or disturbing.
- it is good to remember which contacts that are online-only and which contacts that exist both on- and offline.
- the adult wanting to meet with young people for sex sometimes succeeds in creating an impression that he and the young person are connected in more ways than is really the case
- sharing disturbing and problematic online experiences or sequences of events with friends is protective in itself as it will increase the shared knowledge in a peer group.
- recognising yourself in others is a powerful tool for creating a safer online culture among young people.
- if an online-only contact wants to move to other contact platforms such as texting via mobile phone, talking on land-line phone or using multiple chat sites you should be especially cautious.
- rules on staying safe online are no different for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT) than others, but online-only contacts seem often to be more valued by young LGBT people
- young LGBT people have often found online contacts supportive in the coming out process,
- discussions about sex and sexuality with online-only contacts, may for LGBT young people as for other young people develop into something problematic.
- young people in residential care often depend more on online communication to maintain contact with friends they no longer are geographically close and this may create problematic situations

- also other young people, even young people they know IRL, may exhibit harmful and/or exploitative online behaviour
- there may be a link between being a victim of online bullying or identity thefts and becoming a victim of grooming
- they themselves are the experts in what safety programmes work and which doesn't
- knowing about safety online is not the same as behaving safely at all times

Teachers and educators

- should be trained and prepared to discuss issues related to Internet use including such sensitive issues as seeking sexual partner online and sexual exploration online.
- would benefit from information on the process of grooming and on safe sex online in order for this to be included in discussions on sexuality in schools.
- should understand that online sexual abuse is not a technical issue but a child protection issue and should be treated as such
- should ask young people about online habits and possible abusive and harmful experiences online.
- need easy access to high quality information on where to find assistance should they meet a young person with a problematic online life.
- should make safer internet information inclusive for all young people – also young people that question their sexuality or identify themselves as LGBT but may not be open about this.
- require specific prevention programmes reflecting the special situation and experiences of young people in different places on the spectrum of abilities and disabilities. Special attention should be paid to staying safe when adding people to contact lists in social networks.
- need to recognise that describing safety online and sharing experiences of online interaction with and between young people with a learning disability are vital.
- should recognise that the first person to be told about an online contact which is becoming disturbing or problematic is usually a friend.
- should encourage young people to share online communication and talk about online experiences with their parents: also about experiences that parents may find objectionable such as sexual exploration.
- can volunteer to listen to young people's online lives as can a school nurse. School counsellors may actively offer this role. In the absence of an adult to talk to young people should be encouraged to talk to friends and peers and, as a last resort, it should be possible to identify an online community they can share concerns and experiences with.

ROBERT Summary for everyone: Young people at risk of online sexual abuse - Findings

The ROBERT project has interviewed 27 young people that have experienced online sexual abuse. The ROBERT project also conducted 27 focus group interviews with approximately 185 young persons that were either in residential care or in institutions, having some form of disability, like not hearing well or having a hard time learning in school. The project also interviewed young people that were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Some of the young people in the focus groups were just general young people.

In the following summary for everyone, some of the themes the project set out to respond to are looked at.

In the text we will be referring to the interviewed young people as the young persons that have experienced online sexual abuse. When we discuss issues highlighted by the Focus groups we will indicate this.

For a full analysis of each of the diverse parts of the ROBERT work, we recommend reading the individual reports, all of which are available from the ROBERT website: www.childcentre.info/Robert. Hardcopies are also available in limited numbers from the Children's Unit at the Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat.

Major issues

Half of European adolescents have been subjected to sexual harassment or solicitation online at some point in their lives and a substantial number have had such experiences more than once.

Offline meetings

Initiating offline meetings and initiating contacts online

Boys use more active approaches online and try to start online conversations with unknown people, specifically female peers more often. Boys also more often try to arrange meetings offline. Girls were less likely to initiate approaches to others and seem to do so for other reasons.

Seeking new friends or contacts online often result in offline meetings. Young people across the Focus groups reported both having fun at such meetings and that some meetings went wrong. The meetings that went wrong could do so because: 1) a person in real life turned out to be different from his/ her online persona (older or not as nice), 2) an online acquaintance was aggressive or violent during the meeting (a boy was beaten by a girl).

Online communication is a way to keep your friends. More so than to make new contacts with people who were not known in the offline world. Nevertheless, for young lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people and for young people with some forms of disabilities Internet is also a way to find other young people who are similar to themselves (a friend or a partner for sex). Some boys in the Focus groups will report having used the Internet to find a sexual partner.

When is a young person at risk of online sexual abuse?

For most of the young people interviewed, something was wrong with, or something was missing from their lives, that going online might make better. They spoke about dealing with the bad things in life or a desire to be understood, a need for a space of their own to do things in their own way and some spoke about wanting to explore sex. These themes suggested times in their lives when they were vulnerable, either through past problematic experiences, or feelings of not being listened to, or understood, or a need to find out more about their own sexuality in ways that could not be done IRL. Young people who felt lonely chatted online more often about personal and intimate topics than those who did not feel lonely. Lonely and frightened adolescents do seem to prefer online meetings to IRL meetings and feel that this is easier.

Are there any groups of young people that are more at risk of online sexual abuse?

Gender

Girls are more at risk of being sexually solicited online. Girls are 2- 4 times as likely to be targeted with sexual online requests and suggestions than are boys.

Boys use the Internet more frequently for sex than girls do. Adolescent boys chat more often about sex and they also have more sex contacts online than girls. Boys are more likely than girls to show themselves naked in front of the web cam or have sex using the web cam.

Age

The older you get the more suggestions for sexual meetings or requests to send sexy pictures will you receive.

Age is a hot issue in the focus groups. Young LGBT people will all report how they are being targeted online because they are young and how they need be careful so the person they are planning on meeting really is the age he or she says. Especially men will often turn out to be much older than they say online. Lying about your age is also something that means trying to be someone you're not. Age may be just one of the issues where you may become disappointed.

Sexual orientation

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, LGBT, seems to indicate a higher risk for receiving sexual questions or being asked for sexy images. There are no studies saying that young LGBT people are harmed more often online.

LGBT people in the Focus know that they need to be careful online. Meetings should always be arranged in public places with other people around. To have friends, parents and teachers to talk to is essential as experiences can then be spoken about. Telling your friends about bad experiences is a good way to stay safe and it helps others too.

Abilities/disabilities

Children's abilities have not been looked at in relation to their experiences of online sexual requests or harmful experiences. Studies have shown that children with some form of disability suffer more sexual abuse offline than other groups. We don't know if this is true also in the online world. Online contacts are valuable to many young people with a disability as the technology often will put them on equal footing with others. For example a person with that cannot hear can easily chat just like anyone else.

"Yes, [when talking with a girl] I don't become familiar straight away. It's difficult though." (Boy with a disability)

Being from another country

Some studies indicate that young people from another country, may be more at risk of being approached online by adults that want to meet them for sex. Young people with a background in another country are not used to the customs of the new country and may therefore not know exactly what young people do.

What may put you at risk online?

If you have been abused before

Children that have been abused before are at higher risk of receiving online sexual requests. Some children that have been abused also show sexually aggressive behaviour online themselves.

Feeling bad makes a young person more vulnerable to become a victim online. It may be that the adult online wanting to meet with young people for sex, takes advantage of this and acts as a friend or a supporting person to come close to the young person.

Girls that have been sexually abused receive more questions about sex online and are more often asked for sexy pictures. Those that present themselves online in a sexy way do too.

The young people in the Interview chatted around sexual matters with online contacts. This had to do with how the interviewed young people looked online for ways of being less lonely or feeling better about themselves. They also wanted to take control of their own life.

Awareness of online risks

Young people in the Focus groups are aware of online risks. Some accepted a level of risk as inevitable online but that it could generally be avoided. Some thought that being online can be dangerous. Young people know that giving out your email or your telephone number or posting pictures online can lead to problems

Young people who have experience of life in care, either in an institution or in other care, believe that you could be at greater risk online depending on where you live or the family you live in. They believe that young people who live in big cities and live with their family are more at risk of being sexually abused online than young people who stay in institutions or live in villages.

Being sad and lonely

The link between feeling sad and sexual requests is not clear. Young people that feel bad more often answer when they receive a sexual question or a sexual request. Some adults that want to meet young people for sex seem to be able to understand if a young person is sad or feels bad. The adult wanting contact with young people do send more such questions if they believe the young person may feel bad or sad and lonely.

Young people that post sexy images of themselves online or that use the webcam for sex often feel that they don't belong anywhere. They worry more than others.

If you have a low level of self-confidence and self-esteem focus group members thought you may more often answer to a sexy request..

“... she was out in the evenings, she'd be out during the day, she didn't bother to go to work, and couldn't even care less about not earning a living. And so she was glad to see me sitting in front of the computer, because she could then say: 'you see what a good girl she is, she never does anything or goes anywhere, she doesn't get on my nerves or make me angry'” (Girl victim of online sexual abuse)

Family situation

A risk factor seems to be if the young person lives with only one of the parents or in a step family. The research on this doesn't say why.

Selling sex

Young people selling sex do so online. Very few young people do sell sex and using the internet does not seem to make this more common among young people. Those selling sex have several problems in their lives and they often feel as if they have nowhere they belong. Young people selling sex are more often physically threatened and use more drugs and drink more beer, wine and liquor.

In our interviews we also spoke to young people who had gone online in order to sell sex. They said they wanted to do this to get money and these sexual acts were described as sometimes good and sometimes bad. (From interview report)

Finding out about sex online and if this links to sexual abuse

Looking at pornography online

Many young people see pornography online. Most young people find pornography since they look for it. Even if they did look for it, they may sometimes find it disgusting or difficult to look at. Looking at porn online is in most countries very common.

Chatting online about sex

Chatting about sex online with strangers is thought to be dangerous by some. Some experts believe that discussing sex online can protect young people. When we ask young people themselves as many as one in five children will say that they have chatted online about sex and that they liked it.

Focus groups will tell us that LGBT young people of both sexes as well as males from other groups seem to use Internet to find out more about sex. They also use it to find friends and sexual partners. They tend to more often than other groups of young people arrange offline meetings with people they initially met online. LGBT young people are active in using different ways to stay safe.

Showing yourself naked or almost naked online

Young people do not often show themselves naked or almost naked online. Around 10% of older teens have posted sexy pictures of themselves. Slightly more of the young people have showed themselves in a sexy way in the web cam; 12% of the boys and 16% of the girls. Fewer than that has masturbated in front of the web cam so that someone else can see.

Sexuality online

Most cases that are reported to the police in the US dealing with online abuse are cases where the young person is not old enough to have sex but where he or she knew before meeting that they were going to have sex. There may therefore be necessary to talk more fully with young people about sex and how online meetings may develop. This should also be done in countries where such meetings would not be criminal since the age of consent in Europe is lower than in most US states.

The young people in the interviews knew they were meeting for sex. Some in the interviews had had sex before, and all of them, also the younger ones were curious about what might happen.

None of these young people saw themselves as 'victims'. Some think that it is wrong to see young people as innocent and vulnerable. They think we need to accept children's sexuality. Parents cannot be with the child online so we need to accept that young people seek activity and to be active when using computers, mobiles, ipads or games platforms.

For some young people in the interviews, but not all, the sexual activity, the abuse meant really feeling that they could not change anything and that they lost their feeling of deciding what should happen.

Sexting – sending sexy messages

Sexting is a part of the online sexual behaviour of young people. Several young people have sent sexy images and even more young people report having received such images.

Some young people living in care or in institutions don't seem to think about the negative consequences if they post their own sexy pictures or their friend's sexy pictures online. Young people with a difficulty of learning will in the Focus groups show difficulties in understanding what it means to stay safe online.

Web cam use and web cam sex

Being asked for sex online, like showing yourself naked or almost naked in front of the web cam is sometimes OK to some young people. Boys are more likely than girls to pose naked in front of the web cam or show themselves in a sexy way than girls.

In the Focus groups many young people will speak about how important webcams are. Young people living far away from home use it to communicate with their friends and families and for children with hearing impairments, a webcam means that it is easier to chat or talk online. For the LGBT young people along with others, it offers both a possibility for sex as well as a way of knowing who they are talking to.

How do young people respond to online grooming?

Grooming and online manipulation

Adults wanting to meet young people for sex use different ways to get in contact with young people and sometimes young people respond to these. They can pretend to be able to offer the young person jobs as artists or models and such offers are sometimes seen as interesting by young people. Internet in itself makes such offers seem possible.

Moving between different ways of staying in contact

The young persons in the interviews chatted more and more often with the adult. After a while the contacts were moved from only online chat to speaking and texting on the mobile and face-to-face meetings. When this happened the young person needed to lie to his parents about where he or she had been. Lying was difficult but the young person did this in order to stay in contact with the adult. This also made the young person feel responsible for the sexual abuse since they had told lies about who they were with or who they were talking to on the phone.

The young persons interviewed felt that to be in contact with others without their parents knowing made them feel that they were in control of their lives. As the contact with the adult grew more and more intense with more and more messages being passed, the relationship was intensified. At this time they also started to be in contact in different ways: both on the Internet and via text messages and phone calls. Some of our people in the interviews felt bad about this. They felt bad about keeping routine activities like phone calls a secret.

Keeping secrets and telling lies

Young people have secrets from parents as one way of becoming independent. They do need also to stay connected. The younger people in the present interview study felt bad about keeping secrets but telling lies is different from keeping secrets.

The young persons interviewed in the study kept an online contact secret since this contact wanted to meet for sex. Some young people will talk about the contact as normal. In one of the interviews the young person clearly stated that if she had only been a bit older, the relationship would have been seen as normal. Some of the adults did trick the young people but most of the young people in this study thought that they were in a relationship and that this relationship was sexual. This was both exciting and confusing and was often called romantic.

Keeping a relationship secret was for many of the young people in this study was not as difficult or as painful, as telling lies.

Online sexual abuse is a crime and when the contact is seen as romantic if happens without anyone knowing. The feelings may be particularly powerful and difficult.

Losing control of what happens

Many of the relationships where the young person was abused, was felt in the beginning to be controlled by the young person. They described how they felt happy and relieved to have found a person to feel close to. To know a person that understood them and that was always available to them. The adult managed from the start to convince the young person that they would stay close. The young people described being sad since their parents were divorced. They also felt a bit outside with friends at school, and often left on their own by parents they felt did not have time to be with them.

Can young people resist dangers online?

Online contacts may protect you

Young people think of online contacts as less dangerous and easier. The screen provides some protection and discussing sex online is perceived as not as dangerous than IRL.

"...in my opinion, through a screen you're able to say a lot more than you can to someone's face, even if you are arguing about something, I, personally, find it much easier through the computer, at least for me..." (Girl in general focus group)

Is online and offline the same thing to young people?

Young people in the Focus groups see online and offline worlds as different. Some of them believe that the online world is less dangerous than the real one. For all the Focus groups there is a major difference between those you know only online and those you know also IRL: Those you know IRL are more important.

Strong, friendly and trustful relationships could be formed with online-only contacts. In most cases young people across all Focus groups admitted that they would never be able to develop close and trustful relationships with people they know only online and have never met in person.

Some young people thought that relationships are easier online. If someone quarrels or breaks up the relationship with another person online it is easier compared to a similar situation in real life.

"What do you mean by 'difference'? It is the difference between a real person and a computer." (Boy with disability)

How do you learn how to be safe online?

LGBT persons in the Focus groups describe what they do to avoid meetings going wrong. Boys and members of the LGBT Focus groups may use Internet for finding out about sex. They talk about sex with friends and search for information about sex.

For LGBT young people in the Focus groups the Internet is also a safe place to go for support. Some also talk about how they used the Internet to come out and share their true sexual orientation with at least some people. In this way, the Internet becomes for LGBT people that allows for a necessary and valuable kind of growth.

Who do you talk to if you have been sexually abused online and why would you not say anything to anyone?

Telling someone about sexual abuse is difficult. When it happens in the online world it seems to be even more difficult. The young people that have been sexually abused online will not report the online sexual abuse as fully as they will the sexual abuse that happens IRL. Online abusive acts are even less talked about than offline sexual abuse.

When the sexual abuse online is disclosed by the young person, or when someone discovers it

The sexual abuse of all of the young people interviewed in the study had been disclosed by themselves or discovered by someone else. This was a difficult thing. It was interesting that younger people would speak about the abuse to family members. Young people would not talk about the abuse as they were afraid what might happen. The presence of pictures made it more difficult to talk about the abuse.

Important adults

Some young people felt good about talking about the abuse. They felt understood by the adults they met and said that it is important that adults understand that they need to ask questions again and again. They also wanted adults to be open to discussions and that young people need understanding and warm adults around them. This is especially true if the young person has been sexually abused.

Young people would also say that it was important to them that they could decide who should know about the sexual abuse. This then allowed them to stay a little in control.

End note

If you are interested in reading more about the young people the ROBERT project interviewed, you can do so in the four reports published. You find them on the ROBERT website: childcentre.info/Robert. If you want to speak to or email someone that knows much about young people and sexual abuse online, you can visit www.saferinternet.org. From there you can click on your country in order to find someone in your area to speak to.