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Final report and Recommendations ROBERT project summary



ROBERT project team



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Introduction

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 increase our understanding of the way online contacts sometimes develop into becoming sexually abusive. Through this increased understanding the ROBERT project aims to raise the quality of the information available to young people on how to navigate safely online. The analysis of how risk related behaviours act in combination with the vulnerabilities of children, the opportunities afforded by technology, and result in sexual abuse and exploitation in our view can only be explored through a thorough understanding of cases where young people have come to harm. Through interviewing young people with abusive experiences it is now possible to describe with more accuracy the way some young people become involved with perpetrators online and describe the process leading to the abuse, be it in the offline worlds or online.

The focus groups conducted within the ROBERT project have included children who have previously been considered to display particular vulnerabilities with regard to online abuse, such as those with some form of disabilities, young LGBT people and young people in care.

The interview guide generated by the project team enabled the exploration of young people's knowledge and experiences of online abusive practices, as well as resiliencies demonstrated when children make decisions that keep them safe.

Acknowledgements: 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 where article 13 specifically addresses the child's right to freedom in accessing information in any form and where article 34 specifically addresses the right for the child to be protected from all forms of exploitation. Article 39 goes on to spell out obligations by state parties to 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.

Policy makers and programme developers

- should develop Internet safety programmes in close cooperation with young people themselves. Programmes should avoid scare tactics as there is little evidence that these are effective.
- should recognise that Internet safety programmes need a component about sexual exploration and include discussions about safe sex online.
- should understand that information on online sexual abuse and violence need specifically target young people aged 11 – 18, as these stand out as being more at risk.
- should take account of the fact that risks online increase dramatically when a young person is in conflict with parents, feels lonely and/or is depressed and finds it difficult to communicate. These feelings and situations are well known to all young people and need to be addressed in the context of online safety.
- need to recognise that young people are curious about sex and sexuality; their own and that of others. Parents, teachers, child protection staff and child psychologists may not approve of or like what young people access, discuss or do online but in order to assist young people to a safer online life it is vital that their curiosity and investigations be recognised and not reproached.

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.

Child psychiatry and paediatricians should

- recognise the impact that the disclosure process has for the young person and that how the investigative process with young people can become an essential tool in assisting victims of online sexual abuse
- also take the young sex offender, up to the age of 18, into consideration. Psychological support should be provided and implications for the therapy should be taken into account when meeting with adolescent offenders.

Law enforcement

- need to take online sexual abuse seriously. Grooming activity should be regarded as preparation to commit a crime and merit the interest of law enforcement

- should act also on suspicions of grooming activities targeting young people above the age of consent
- need to prepare for difficulties created by the fact that the legal definition of what constitutes a child is arbitrary
- should understand that children are sexually active long before the age of majority and before the age of consent
- should acknowledge that young people are disturbed and in some cases clearly traumatised by the prolonged interrogations
- need to recognise that young people need to be able to control who was told of the interviews and what.

Young people should know that

- it is the online-only contacts that may become problematic or disturbing.
- it is beneficial to distinguish an online only contact from one that exists both on- and offline.
- the perpetrator in successful grooming processes online 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 peers 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 they should be specifically cautious.
- rules on staying safe online are no different for LGBT people 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

ROBERT Summary¹: Young people at risk of online sexual abuse - Research, interviews and focus groups' findings

The ROBERT project has collected research on online sexual abuse facing children and young people in order to highlight a number of issues of concern to researchers, practitioners, child rights organisations and policy makers. The project has also interviewed 27 young people that have experienced online sexual abuse. In order to look into the issue of vulnerabilities and groups considered possibly to be vulnerable, ROBERT project conducted 27 focus group interviews with approximately 185 young persons that were either in residential care, having some form of disability, were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender or were part of the general population. The latter group may naturally include young people from any of the specific groups mentioned. In the following summary the themes the project set out to respond to are revisited and findings from the diverse parts of the research are used to respond and highlight concerns and new knowledge.

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

According to studies approximately 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

Focus groups report gender-specific methods in online approaches made to other people. Boys use more active approaches and report initiating online conversations with unknown people, specifically female peers and arrange meetings with them offline. Girls were less likely to report that they initiated approaches to others and, when they did, they were either trying to receive support from someone or to make fun of someone.

Focus groups will report that in many cases seeking new friends or contacts online result in offline meetings. Young people across the Focus groups reported both positive and negative consequences of offline meetings. Among the negative consequences the following was mentioned: 1) a person in real life turned out to be different from his/ her online persona (older or not as attractive), 2) an online acquaintance showed aggression towards the young person during the meeting (a boy was beaten by a girl).

Focus groups see online communication as a way to sustain friendships already established offline, rather than to make new contacts with people who were not known in the offline world. Nevertheless,

¹ Please note: This summary will not give you references for the different statements read. In the ROBERT reports you can find full lists of references. www.childcentre.info/robert

for young LGBT 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 sexual partner). Boys in Focus groups will report having used the Internet to find a sexual partner.

At risk of online sexual abuse

Focus groups have shown that there are more similarities than differences between different groups of young people in the way they use Internet, divide the online and offline worlds, initiate online relations with unknown people by themselves, perceive persons who potentially could cause harm either online or in real life as well as in what they know about Internet safety and what they do to stay safe online.

For all our respondents in the interviews their lives and, in particular, their social relationships, were in part mediated through technology. Previous research have suggested that the most common online activities for their adolescents online are social in nature and often involved online interactions with people known from offline contexts and posts and messages provided a way of staying constantly connected with peers.

For the majority of the young people interviewed, they spontaneously talked about something being wrong with, or missing from their lives, that going online might make better. This had to do with dealing with the bad things in life a desire to be understood, a craving for a space to do things in their own way and wanting to explore sex. These themes were strongly expressed and reflected a disparate group of needs, but suggested possible vulnerability, either through past problematic experiences, or current feelings of not being listened to, or understood, or a need to explore sexuality in ways that could not easily be accomplished offline. Some of the bad things that had happened included sexual abuse, by family members and also by peers. Another study of confirmed cases of sexually abused girls compared with those who were not sexually abused, found that abused girls were significantly more likely to have experienced online sexual advances and to have met someone offline. Having been abused and choosing a provocative 'avatar' were significantly and independently associated with online advances, and these in turn were associated with offline encounters. Difficult relationships with parents were also parts of these feelings of something missing in life and these feelings of sadness, loneliness and insecurity. In other studies such feelings have been associated with higher levels of online communication. Young people who self-reported being lonely communicated online significantly more frequently about personal and intimate topics than those who did not report loneliness. There seems to be evidence that overall socially anxious and lonely adolescents turn to the Internet for online communication less often than adolescents who are not lonely and socially anxious. Lonely and socially anxious adolescents do seem to prefer online to face-to-face communication and value its controllability.

Groups of young people more at risk of online sexual abuse

Gender

Girls are more at risk of being sexually solicited online. The ratio is that girls are 2- 4 times as likely to be targeted with sexual online requests and suggestions

Boys use the Internet more frequently for sexual activities than girls do. Adolescent boys talk more often about sex online and they also engage in more sexual activities online than girls. Boys are more likely than girls to pose naked in front of the web cam or show or display themselves sexually than girls.

Age

There is an increase in the risk of receiving sexual messages or unwanted pornographic material with age. Some studies would however claim that there is a peak at around 18 – 20 years of age, after which the risk remains stable. The fact there are so few studies made on young adults however makes this a somewhat contentious conclusion to make.

In the Focus groups a tendency of young people to believe that online risks relate to 'others', to people different from themselves was evident, as was the impression that their own risk-taking had occurred when they were somewhat younger and more naive than they are now. Risk was also seen to be a gender-related issue, with females being identified as often more vulnerable than males. The fact that the young people in the Focus groups attribute risks and vulnerability to outsiders or outside factors may be also linked to difficulties expressing –in front of an open group and an unknown moderator – their own vulnerabilities and weaknesses and may therefore represent, at least in part, a form of defence.

Age is a hot issue in the focus groups. Young LGBT people will all report how they are being targeted for their age and how they need carefully to assess if the person they are planning on meeting really is the age he or she says. Several reports are of how especially men will turn out much older than their online persona. There is also in one group a brief discussion about younger boys flirting and how to manage this without becoming the bad old guy. For the girls in the LGBT Focus groups the age issue was less prevalent even if some groups would talk about older women out there. It seems that age becomes synonymous for 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 being targeted by online solicitations and sexual requests as is shown in several studies. However, studies looking at how young LGBT persons use ICT and the risks they recognise and encounter are scarce.

Young LGBT people in the Focus groups seem to be well aware of the fact that staying out of harm's way demands a high level of consciousness. Meetings should always be arranged in public places with other people around. If done in this way it isn't necessary to adhere to the old golden rule of bringing a friend. To have friends, parents and teachers to talk to is essential as experiences can then be openly discussed. Telling your friends about bad experiences is a good way to stay safe, both for

yourself and for others and in the focus groups such experiences are again shared in order to give others a better understanding.

Risktaking online

Risktaking online is an important and possibly contentious factor. The behaviours connected to this are generally accepted as risky behaviours and appear as a variable in most studies looking at online risks. The factors that are considered “risky” have not been validated as such and the strength of the different factors either as standalone risks or their accumulated potency in creating sexually abusive situations have not been studied.

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 are exposed to more sexual abuse offline than other groups but no studies have looked at whether this is true also in the online world. Online contacts may be highly preferred by young people with a disability as the technology often will put them on equal footing with others.

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

Ethnicity

Some studies indicate that young people with migrant background may be more at risk of being targeted by online offenders. The suggestion being that they are regularly less familiar with the customs of the new country and may therefore live in less protective contexts. Similarly studies have also shown that young people with a minority background may more frequently report meeting strangers offline.

Individual risks and risky contexts – What may put you at risk online?

Previous history of abuse

Children with a risk background tend to be both at higher risk of receiving online sexual solicitations whilst exhibiting sexually aggressive behaviour online themselves.

The fact that children and young people with a history of sexual or physical abuse receive many more sexual solicitations online may be because the two are interlinked: similar factors appear to be at work to children at risk of being sexually abused offline as being sexually solicited online. Psychological distress however, makes a young person more vulnerable to further victimisation and it may well be that the psychological distress caused by abuse is taken advantage of by the perpetrator, exploiting the emotional vulnerability of the young person.

In studying specific traits and behaviours that seem to predict a higher level of solicitations, a study showed that girls with previous abusive experiences did indeed receive more solicitations as did those presenting themselves in a provocative way. The two risks were however unrelated.

The young people in the Interview study were not passive in their engagement with others, but actively pursued contacts, and in some instances communicated around sexual matters with online contacts. This online-only-communication seems different to many of the reports of other young people's experiences, where more physically present sociality was associated with commonly reported activities, such as using Facebook, email or chat. This, in part, seemed to relate in the present study to respondents searching online for ways of meeting needs that could not easily be achieved in their offline world. It is clear from the analysis that this reflected disparate needs, contexts and histories, but being online offered the opportunity for agency: to be in control. One implication of this is that the use of such media served a purpose for these young people that cannot be construed simply as passive media consumption, in the same way that we might have thought about, for example, viewing television.

Awareness of online risks

The majority of young people in the Focus groups seem to be aware of online risks. Perceptions of online dangers ranged from those who accepted that some level of risk was inevitable online but it could generally be avoided, to those who perceived the online environment as being associated with significant risks. Mostly young people are aware that making personal information available and sharing photographs could lead to problems, that physical reality could be very different from what is stated or appears online, and that people online are not always truthful.

Young people across all Focus groups seem to use what can be referred to as common knowledge when identifying potentially dangerous persons. In most cases they see this person as a stranger, a person 30 – 50 years old who practices odd behaviour which is different from a normal "netiquette" and who raises a feeling that something is not "quite right". In all the groups, except for young LGBT people, a foreign national, "maybe Albanian" was regarded as a potential risk even though one participant mentioned that it could be just a form of negative prejudiced stereotyping and may not always be true.

Young people who have experience of institutional life (young people in residential care and young people with disabilities) perceive that geographical and social location could expose a person to a greater online risk than others. Young people who live in big cities and live with their family were regarded to be at greater risk of being victimized online than young people who stay in institutions or live in villages.

Being depressed

The link between depressive feelings and sexual requests is still unclear. Young people with depressive feelings seem to be more likely to respond to sexual questions and requests and perpetrators seem to be able to detect if young people are depressed and thus susceptible to sexual advances. This may not be a very sophisticated process and could be merely coincidences stemming from the fact that online sexual requests are sent to so many that some will fall into the category of being depressed. Even so, this stands out as one individual risk factor.

Studies have also associated young people posting images online or exposing themselves on web cam to have less of a sense of coherence in their lives and to be more lonely, worried and abandoned.

Many young people in the Focus groups also acknowledged that some elements of risk relate to levels of self-confidence and self-esteem.

“... 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 in a single parent household or in a step family. What it is in the household situation that makes the child more susceptible to online requests is unknown and since these studies are mainly US based we do not know whether there is a correlation in European countries.

Selling sex

Young people selling sex do so increasingly online, even if the number of young people doing this is low and remains unchanged over the years in the country where the study was repeated. Those selling sex experience problems in various areas of their lives and receive a lower score on the scale measuring their sense of coherence. This group is exposed to higher levels of exposure to threats and violence and they have higher levels of drug and alcohol use.

This also touches on issues of agency. In our interviews we included young people who had gone online in order to be able to get money for sexual activities, and their accounts of these sexual acts also included a spectrum of sexual experiences, which were perceived as being both negative and positive. (From interview report)

Sexual exploration online and possible links to abusive practices

Accessing pornography

Experience will tell us that abuse over the Internet appears on a sliding scale from expressions of innocence and curiosity to a more active possibly sexual behaviour on the side of the young person. To be exposed to pornographic material is one example of this. It is claimed that most hits for porn are the result of an active search. The images or films can naturally be shocking

to the child even so but maybe pornography does not attack children quite as often as is sometimes claimed. Exposure to pornography online can be described as a normative experience which even so means that some children and young people, especially girls will find it highly disturbing. Nordic studies tend to reveal a higher proportion of young people reporting having watched pornography with boys being those accessing porn the most.

Talking about sex online

Talking about sexual matters online is considered risky in some studies but in a few it is argued that discussing sex and sexuality online can actually be seen as protective. Some studies will show that one in five children has discussed sex on the Internet and in follow up questions most have stated that it was a good experience.

Focus groups will tell us that LGBT young people of both sexes as well as males from other groups seem to use Internet more actively than other groups of young people for sexual exploration and for looking for friends and sexual partners. They tend to more often than other groups of young people arrange offline meetings with people they initially met online. At the same time young LGBT people seem to be most active in implementing diverse strategies and complementing each other's strategies to stay safe on different stages of communication with an unknown person starting from the moment of initial contact and ending with an offline meeting. This does not seem to be relevant to males from other groups who try to find sexual partners via Internet, especially males in residential care who do not tend to take any safety measures when arranging offline meetings with their Internet acquaintances. This makes males from all the groups except LGBT potentially more vulnerable and increases the potential risk for them to become victimized by online sexual perpetrators.

Self-exposure

Youth are restrictive when it comes to exposing themselves online with around 10% of older teens reporting having posted sexualised images. A higher proportion however will report having posed nude in front of the web cam, 12% for boys and 16% of the girls. Fewer again have masturbated in front of the web cam. The reported actions were not reported as being abusive but as part of their online activities, however, those reporting this behaviour had less of a sense of coherence and reported less parental care than those that had not participated in this kind of (voluntary) exposure.

Sexual expressions online

A majority of the online abuse cases studied in the US relate to statutory rape where the young person was aware of the sexual intentions of the perpetrator before the meeting. This would point to the young adolescent's use of the Internet as a possible venue for exploring their sexuality and for sexual expression. The offences were in some cases repeated, as many of the victims would agree to meet the perpetrator more than once. Whatever view we take on young people's age appropriate sexual expression these statutory rape cases would indicate a need to communicate more fully with young people about such sexual expression and how online encounters may develop. This should also be done in countries where such meetings would not be criminal per se since age of consent in Europe is lower than in most US states.

All of the young people in the interviews identified themselves, or at times were identified by other people, as having experienced contacts with others online that ultimately became problematic. However, the sexual nature of these contacts appeared, at least initially, to be reciprocal. For some respondents they already saw themselves as being

sexually active, and for all, including the younger ones, there was a curiosity about what might happen, and the opportunities that the Internet afforded. Authors claim that the notion of affordance permeates almost all aspects of the Internet and expands our traditional ideas about media use. The interactivity of the Internet for these young people enhanced their involvement with the content. This reflects an “agentic perspective” where, with high levels of interactivity, these young people were vested in the power and the opportunity to switch from being a receiver to being a sender. This in part is reflected in not only in exchanges of text content, but also practices that related to image production and sharing.

None of these young people described themselves as ‘victims’. Some authors suggest that it is unhelpful to see children as only innocent, vulnerable and biddable and argue that we need to confront the reality of children’s sexuality and exploration of risk. In recognising the limitations of parental oversight there is a need for us to accept that young people seek agency through their use of technology and that we need to move away from models of control and protection of young people to consider what it means for them to be active participants and the power and consequences that such participation brings.

For some respondents in the interviews, but not all, the ultimate loss of control related to the sexual activity with the perpetrator, which was described in a variety of ways, from being violent and humiliating to something that “wasn’t very nice”. What was also different across respondents was whether the sexual activity was discrete, taking place on only one occasion, or whether it lasted over a period of time.

Sexting

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 in residential care, as expressed in the Focus groups, seem to be less aware than other groups of young people of the negative consequences of posting their own pictures or their friend’s pictures online, particularly those taken for fun or with a sexual content. Young people with learning disabilities and/or a need for special support will in the Focus groups show difficulties in understanding abstract behaviour including methods of staying safe online.

Web cam use and web cam sex

Requests for sexual activity online, such as posing in front of the web cam are not always met with disapproval. Boys are more likely than girls to pose naked in front of the web cam or expose themselves than girls.

Webcams are vital means of communication for different groups of young people as described in the Focus groups. Young people away from home use it mainly to communicate with their friends and families, for children with disabilities such as hearing impairments, a webcam provides a way of communicating outside of text, and for the LGBT young people, as well as others, it offers sexual opportunities as well as a way of validating who they are talking to.

The grooming process and young persons' possible responses

Grooming strategies and manipulation

There are concerns about the manipulative strategies that perpetrators deploy to catch young people's attention and how young persons respond to these. It seems that different forms of offers connected to performing; acting or modelling, i.e. opportunities that are uncommon and sought after carry significant attraction to several young people and that such offers given in chat rooms will attract the attention of and possible response from several girls. Studies of European police reports would indicate such offers being a concern. The quality of the Internet and its immediacy here seems to work for the initiator, making such offers seem plausible.

Research into perpetrator behaviour has largely been done without taking into account how the responses of the young person to requests and suggestions might trigger new advances by the offender leading the process towards violence and abuse. The typical online offender studied is the abuse images offender where the interaction is with images, films or other non-responding objects. It is fair to assume that the strategies employed by online offenders wishing to engage the young person in sexual acts online or offline would be different and more influenced by the responses received.

Moving between different platforms

For the young persons in the interviews the interaction with the perpetrator meant an increase in the frequency of contact and its move to mobile communication and face-to-face meetings which necessitated lies about his or her whereabouts or about the times spent on the phone. This was a sacrifice respondents needed to make in order to maintain the contact and appeared to be exploited by the perpetrator. This scenario is not new and has been documented in much earlier research on the sexual abuse of children and young people, and the enforcement of secrets as part of making them accessories to the sexual acts.

Young persons interviewed strongly associated the ability to communicate with others in privacy with the feeling that they were making the choices, and reinforced feelings of control and independence. This was very often reflected by increased frequency of exchanges and an intensification of the relationship. This is also marked by movement to different Internet platforms, as well as exchanges of mobile text messages and calls. For some of our respondents this was accompanied by unease and hesitation. What is clearly asked of the young person at this stage by the perpetrator is to bring the contact over from the relative anonymity of the Internet into areas that are closer to home and into routine activities that the young person is not used to keeping secret.

Keeping secrets and telling lies

It would be wrong to describe such keeping of secrets as new to these adolescents. However, having secrets from parents in order to gain independence has to be balanced with a need to stay connected. Having secrets has also been associated with poorer parent-child relationships, acceptance and involvement. It may be that in the present interview study the burden of keeping secrets was felt more keenly in younger respondents but also the act of keeping secrets reflected perceptions of poorer relationships with parents.

What was being kept secret by the young persons interviewed in the study was usually an online contact with someone whose motives were often suspected or known to be sexual. In the category "caught in the web" in the analysis of the interviews with young people that have experienced online sexual abuse these contacts often needed to be framed as normal by the young person in order to justify and maintain them. The issue of normality was often discussed without actual reference to the fact that the other person might have been a young adult, but was clearly older than the young person. In one of the interviews explicit reference was made to the fact that the respondent felt that the relationship would have been seen as normal, outside of the fact that the young person was 11 and the perpetrator was eight years older. While there was some evidence of deception on the part of the perpetrators, for the majority of the young people in this interview study there was a sense that engagement with the individual who sexually assaulted them was sexual and that it may result in sexual activity. This was both exciting and confusing and was often framed as romantic.

Keeping a relationship secret was for many of the young people in this study seen as not as taxing, or as painful, as telling lies. The relationship between disclosure, keeping secrets and lying appears to be complex.

Authors have noted that Internet-initiated sex crimes that are seen as romantic by the young people involved typically take place in isolation and secrecy, without the knowledge of peers or significant adults, and may develop with more self-disclosure and intensity than face-to-face relationships. They also note that the feelings generated may be particularly powerful and challenging to the young person. In the interview study, moving towards this engagement seemed to involve suspension of earlier caution and an unwillingness to see this particular situation as risky. However, the need for control, so central to this study, resulted for all respondents in a loss of control.

Losing control

Paradoxically, discussing sex online was equated ultimately to feelings of loss of control, of things being out of hand and ultimately to experiences of betrayal, abuse or violence for the young persons in the interview study. When the young person felt that they had control over interactions with contacts, these are described as being highly rewarding and charged with positive emotions. Many of the relationships that later turned abusive were from their onset fuelled by this strong sense of control which was, by the young people interviewed, described as emotional. The relief and joy of having found a person to relate closely to, a person that understood the situation of the young person and was available to them, was perceived by the respondents as offering a way out of a life that seemed to lack things that were important to them. The respondents' accounts revealed how perpetrators managed, in the initial contact, to convey promises of closeness accompanied by the possibility of something exciting. The receptiveness of the young person to what was offered by the suspect was clearly evident and was responded to. Many factual explanations were given for the respondents' desire to make contact with new people, longing for something new to happen or the urge to become more visible. These included sadness since their parents were divorced; feeling slightly out-of-sync with friends at school, and being left on their own by parents they felt did not have time to be with them.

Harmful or abusive behaviours by young people

Some young people across all Focus groups exhibit harmful online behaviour themselves. There are gender related differences in this behaviour. Males most frequently report trying to cheat others out of money, get in touch with girls for brief sexual encounters, decide on dating a girl and do not show up, practice illegal activities including listening to illegal CDs, creating problems in someone else's profile in social networks etc. Girls mostly try to cause rifts in relationships or to make fun of others as told in the Focus groups.

Resilience in relation to young people's online behaviour

Avoiding dangers

Few if any studies have looked at resilience to adverse online situations. When accidentally or purposefully viewing pornography most children will say that they were not overly bothered by it and this is one way of looking at children's resilience. Out of those reporting having seen porn online, two in three were not bothered by the experience. Protective factors also come out of the studies where children's experiences of online solicitations are studied as many children interact online with unknown people, sometimes discussing sex, without being exposed to unwanted sexual solicitations or other negative consequences.

Online interaction as protective

Young people perceive online communication as being more protective and easier as the screen provides some protection and sharing sexual experiences online are perceived as being less risky than similar activities offline. This also comes up in interviews with people that have voluntary online sex.

"...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)

Merged realities – online and offline contacts

Young people in the Focus groups perceive online and offline worlds as different, particularly with regard to safety and relationships/communication. Some of them believe that the virtual world is less dangerous than in the real one, others feel that risks linked to virtual and physical world are equal. For all the Focus groups there is a distinction between online-only contacts and online communication with people they know personally, the latter in general is valued more. In cases of online communication with people known offline, the online reality for young people is mostly an extension of the real world. Friends in real life continue to be friends online; sharing passwords to profiles in social networks could be regarded as a confirmation of a real friendship in an offline world, peer pressure to influence behaviour extends to the Internet, and comments made in social networks could influence the offline relationships.

Young people could have different attitudes towards online-only contacts. For some young people, due to their personal characteristics, such contacts could be very valuable as they may play a very specific role in the process of forming their identity and deciding on how to present themselves (especially for young LGBT people), this may allow them to share personal information more easily, to be more open than in offline communication and to discuss issues they have difficulties with in face-to-face communication. Boys and young LGBT people of both sexes have mentioned that it is easier to discuss sexual issues online than face-to-face.

In some cases, as described in the Focus groups, strong friendly and trustful relationships could be formed with online-only contacts. But 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 virtually and have never met in person.

Some young people reported that managing relationships in the virtual world could be a much more straightforward process. Young people from different groups have stated that if someone quarrels or breaks up the relationship with another person in the virtual world it has considerably less negative consequences for the young person compared to a similar situation when the young person quarrels or breaks up a relationship in real life.

As online-only contacts play a significant role in the life of young LGBT people, they seem to develop

a hierarchy of such contacts. The place of a contact in this hierarchy depends on the extent to which they know him/her, and significantly influences the way they deal with that person.

“What do you mean by ‘difference’? It is the difference between a real person and a computer.” (Boy with disability)

Differences in terms of availability and use of the Internet between different groups of young people

Not surprisingly, given the inclusion criteria for the Focus groups, the use of IT-technology was central for all of the young people in their everyday life. Young people from all the groups use different platforms for Internet access including computers cell phones, tablets, smart phones, iPads etc. Among all the platforms used by young people to access Internet cell phones seem to be less controlled by parents and stakeholders.

Young people in residential care as they report in the Focus groups have a set more limited Internet access than young people from other groups and may have a significant difference in Internet availability before and after moving in to residential care, or depending whether they have money to pay for it. But it does not significantly influence the extent to which they use Internet. In all the groups of young people there are those who try to be online as much as possible as well as young people who set their own limits on their use or have such limits set for them by parents or by stakeholders.

Across the groups, young people use Internet to communicate with other people, to share information, search for information related to their hobbies, interests and to aid them with school work. For young people in residential care as well as for young people with some forms of disabilities the Internet provides an opportunity to stay in touch with their friends and relatives who are far away.

Developing protective skills

LGBT persons in the Focus groups have described strategies to avoid meetings going wrong, including risk reduction by ensuring that someone has information of their whereabouts when going to offline meetings with online friends, meeting in a public place or using screening procedures in the online conversation trying to assess the reliability of the online acquaintance. Males and members of the LGBT Focus groups may use Internet for sexual exploration. They openly discuss sexual issues with peers, search for information on sexual issues, use erotic literature and images, and try to establish relationships. An opportunity to explore sexuality online is perceived generally as good; nevertheless some young people think that it may create an impression that sex and relationships are fake and not realistic.

For LGBT young people in the Focus groups the Internet might be a safe place to offer and receive support as well as to come out and share their true sexual orientation (in some cases anonymously or to selected people they know in real life). That may be linked to the fact that there is a lack of socially accepted route or space provided for LGBT young people through which information can be gained and views exchanged with others like themselves. In this way, the Internet becomes a space for this group that allows for a necessary and valuable kind of growth.

Strategy to stay safe

All of the Focus groups had specific strategies they use to minimize the risks they face online. Almost all of the Focus groups gave information which concerned either receiving or giving informal support in respect of staying safe online. Many, but not all, young people restrict the availability of personal information to people they do not know. Other safety measures like avoiding particular sites, avoiding provision of personal information online, identity control, communication blocking, discussing unknown people with friends to assess his/ her behaviour and proactive education were often mentioned in the

interviews as well.

However, there was ambivalence about the opportunities that the Internet afforded and their responses to them, particularly unwanted approaches by others to which young people reacted proactively by refusing to add, blocking or deleting the unwanted person. Some of them would continue communicating with an unknown person to get more information about this person or just to make fun of him/ her. The less common proactive response to unwanted approaches mentioned by young people was reporting this unwanted contact to police or other relevant authorities. There was also a group of young people who reacted to an unwanted approach passively by ignoring or not responding to it.

In the case of arranging an offline meeting with online acquaintances many young people (both boys and girls) mentioned being accompanied to the first meeting by someone else or ensuring the meeting was in a public place.

The LGBT group's behaviour when carrying out searches (searching for online contacts, increased reactivity to undesirable contacts, and online exploration of sexuality) reflects the characteristics of a group which, due to objective difficulties tied to social stigmas, has already, at least in part, gone through a complex process of self-discovery and elaboration of a personal emotional and sexual identity. The resilience that has been built up is therefore also reflected in a greater safety and awareness with which the group seems to be moving around on the Net and facing risks related to it. LGBT young people were more likely to be proactive and assertive in their responses, although this may, in part, have been a function of being somewhat older.

The LGBT group has demonstrated a more selective exposure of their personal information especially about their sexual preference, than in other groups of young people. Besides the strategies mentioned above, young LGBT people use the following: 1) checking age of the person before developing online relations with him/ her; 2) putting the same questions to an online contact a week later in order to check the consistency of his/her responses; 3) checking the consistency of the information an online acquaintance provides via different social networks, messengers and mobile phone; 4) getting a cell phone number from an online acquaintance to check the name of the person holding the subscription; 5) seeing the person via webcam before meeting with him/ her; 6) in case of unwanted approaches, negotiation of the conditions under which it would be possible to continue communication. The LGBT group also appeared to be more proactive than many of the other groups in reporting such individuals to police or other authorities when their own attempts to resolve the situation were unsuccessful.

Young people in residential care seem to know all the main rules on how to stay safe online and implement most of them in daily life. More often than other groups of young people they prefer to block or delete unwanted online contacts without trying to get any additional information about him/ her. At the same time males in residential care tend not to use any safety strategies when arranging offline meetings with females they first got in touch with online.

Even though young people with a learning disability and/or additional support needs were able to mention the main rules on how to stay safe online including restricting access to their personal information, a deeper discussion on the Internet safety issues has shown that they have difficulties in implementing Internet safety strategies in their daily life, have poorer risk management skills and perform a level lower than other young people at the same age who have no learning disability. In particular, more often than other groups of young people they mentioned adding unknown people to their contact lists in social networks.

Being in control

Within the interview study the wish and need for control was evidenced by all respondents. Being in control was often synonymous with feeling safe and self-confident. It has been suggested that the preference for online communication by adolescents over face-to-face communication, particularly in relation to topics that might be embarrassing or shaming, may relate to the enhanced perception of controllability of self-presentation and self-disclosure. Features of online communication that encourage its use include controllability, anonymity, asynchronisation and accessibility.

Understanding the disclosure or non-disclosure of experiences of online sexual abuse

Disclosure of sexual abuse offline is difficult. It seems that the online interaction is under-reported by young people having been abused offline as a result of the online contact. Careful investigation into the online exchanges prior to the offline meeting in some studies reveals that the victims will not report the online abusive experiences as fully as they will the offline abuse. The more severe online sexually abusive acts, like sending nude photos and participating in sexual web cam shows would not be reported. This seems to suggest that online abusive acts are even less reported than offline sexual abuse.

Voluntary disclosure of online sexual abuse or involuntary discovery

All of the young people interviewed in the study were identified because the abuse had been disclosed or discovered. As was discussed in the analysis of the interviews, disclosure for most was a difficult process, was not direct and did not include the significant adults in these young peoples' lives. What was of interest within the interview study was that disclosure to family members was more likely in younger participants, and where there was a sense of being able to trust others with the information. Barriers to disclosure include fears of what might happen if the young person told about the abuse or a perceived lack of support by parents; threats made by the perpetrator; fears that something bad might happen; lack of opportunity; lack of understanding, and having a relationship with the perpetrator. Within the interview study all of these were discussed by respondents, and influenced the decision to disclose, the timing of the disclosure and the amount the young person was prepared to disclose. What also complicated disclosure was the presence of photographic evidence, which served to undermine feelings of being in control of the disclosure. For some respondents this loss of control was most acutely felt in relation to the actions of others, who made choices about the disclosure and its consequences, leaving many of these young people feeling excluded and shamed.

Paradoxically, some of the issues faced by these young people after disclosure raised for them similar concerns as those that led them into the sexual contact in the first place: the relationships with family and friends have to be renegotiated often leading to a struggle around who should know what has happened and also leading to a fear that the aspects of their lives they tried to change, or the void the online contact was to fill, would again open. This loss of control was seen as far reaching and for some blighted the possibility of any future resolution.

Important adults

The accounts of the disclosure process given by the interviewed young people were not all negative, even if many of them were. They highlighted the importance of others (usually adults and often parents) needing to talk to young people, to persist in asking questions and being open to discussions, and to be observant. It is important not to over simplify what helped these young people, but what they emphasised was understanding, warmth and a willingness to offer quiet support throughout what seemed at times a frightening and confusing process, at a pace that they could cope with. In some ways it seems ironic that for many of our respondents the only way that they could maintain a sense of control was to limit the information they were prepared to give.

Figure One:

A tentative model of online behaviour related to sexual abuse.

