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DATA INSIGHT 3

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# ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES FOR CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

ecpat

**About the *Data Insights* series from *Disrupting Harm***

*Disrupting Harm* is a research project conceived and funded by the End Violence Fund through its Safe Online Initiative. The project is implemented by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF and generates national evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response.

So far, new evidence about online child sexual exploitation and abuse has been collected through *Disrupting Harm* in thirteen countries: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Viet Nam). Up to nine primary research activities were undertaken in each country including surveys and interviews with more than 13,000 children, as well as caregivers, and other professionals with child protection mandates. Thirteen country reports were published in 2022, presenting the consolidated findings of all activities conducted within each country, along with targeted recommendations developed together with national stakeholders. Country reports can be found here.

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- **While legal frameworks may exist, children and caregivers described encountering barriers to safe and obtainable formal justice that ranged from the financial, to discrimination, or feeling blamed for the abuse they were subjected to.**
- **Despite some clear moves to make justice more child-friendly, children provided accounts of complex, unfamiliar processes, and intimidating situations, including having to face offenders in-person in the courtroom.**
- **There is a pressing need to go beyond legislative responses regarding compensation and other legal remedies to ensure these rights are known and accessible to children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.**

**Insights are presented predominantly from 61 interviews with children and their caregivers who accessed the formal national justice systems in six of the 13 *Disrupting Harm* countries,[1] and interviews with 101 justice professionals who worked on cases related to online child sexual exploitation and abuse in nine countries.[2] Data from the household survey is also used.[3] All data collection took place in 2020 and early 2021. This analysis describes children's experiences of accessing justice and legal remedies after they had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse. Gaps for States to address are pinpointed.**

States have a moral and legal responsibility to ensure that children who are subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse can access justice and legal remedies. *Disrupting Harm* research identified some promising practices, however in all 13 *Disrupting Harm* countries more action is needed to consistently guarantee that

**Defining online child sexual exploitation and abuse**

Situations involving *digital, internet* and *communication technologies* at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

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children can safely, fairly and easily obtain justice and access to services when they are subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse. According to the children spoken to, fear of discrimination, financial barriers and emotional challenges were commonly encountered.

***Disrupting Harm* research demonstrates that governments need to act in order to pave the way to justice for all children.**

Justice cannot rely on children having to muster courage, determination and financial resources to navigate obstacles. Governments need to make children feel sufficiently safe and confident to report, empowered to seek justice through the formal justice system, supported in their recovery and that they receive compensation for damages suffered.

## Most online child sexual exploitation and abuse is not reported to police

The first step to pro-actively accessing any State s justice system is for the crime to be reported.

**Caregivers surveyed for *Disrupting Harm* were asked to predict what they would do if their child was abused or harassed, but only 49% said that they would report it to the police.[4]**

However, predicted intentions are not always a good indication of actions taken and this becomes evident when looking at the responses from the 1,059 children across twelve countries who indicated in the survey that they had been subjected to one of four clear instances of online sexual exploitation or abuse.[5] Figure 2 shows the proportion of these children who reported to the police. The frequency of formal reporting was remarkably low, and consistent across countries. More than half of children did disclose informally to someone, but generally they preferred to speak to those in their interpersonal networks. One third of children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse told nobody at all.

Children who did not disclose at all (to police or anyone else) were asked why they did not tell anyone about the abuse they were subjected to. Most frequently, children said that they did not know where to go or whom to tell. The second most common reason was that children were afraid that they would be judged or blamed.[6] Frontline workers surveyed as part of *Disrupting Harm* identified that poor public awareness of the formal reporting channels was commonly a barrier.

In countries where homosexuality and pornography are criminalised,[7] fears of self-incrimination might stop children from reporting. For instance, when a child has been abused by an offender of the same sex they may be prosecuted for homosexuality.[8] If a child has been groomed to self-generate sexual photos or videos, they may be prosecuted for creating child sexual abuse material, and offenders can even use this as a threat to discourage reporting.

**Such legal circumstances need urgent attention to make reporting safe for children that experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse and shift public perceptions away from potential victim-blaming that these circumstances can encourage.**

**Figure 1:** Caregivers' stated intention to report to police if their child was abuse or harassed.

| Ethiopia | Kenya | Mozambique | Namibia | Tanzania | Uganda |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 64% | 63% | 62% | 33% | 45% | 48% |

| Cambodia | Indonesia | Malaysia | Philippines | Thailand | Viet Nam |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 67% | 54% | 50% | 49% | 17% | 33% |

**Figure 2:** Proportion of online child sexual exploitation and abuse identified in the *Disrupting Harm* survey that were reported to police.

| Ethiopia | Kenya | Mozambique | Namibia | Tanzania | Uganda |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8% | 3% | 5% | 0% | 0% | 3% |

| Cambodia | Indonesia | Malaysia | Philippines | Thailand | Viet Nam |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2% | 0% | 0% | 4% | 1% | 0% |



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**To address disclosure barriers, communities need to learn what online child sexual exploitation and abuse actually is, how children are targeted and how various roles in the community like teachers, social workers and other trusted adults can help children report to law enforcement as the first point of access to the formal justice system.**

A good practice example identified by *Disrupting Harm* were community information sessions organised by the Uganda Child Helpline where the role technology can play in facilitating child sexual abuse had been discussed. Children interviewed for *Disrupting Harm* in Uganda explained that such sessions led directly to them raising their concerns. In Namibia, it was identified that children came forward as a result of the #BeFree campaign that was initiated by the Office of the First Lady. The campaign encouraged a range of conversations with youth about sex and substance abuse and other youth-related issues.

**As a result of these supported and safe conversations in schools, children felt safe to disclose and report abuse they had previously kept hidden.**

A central message that needs to be conveyed to the community is that it is never the child s fault if an adult sexually abuses them – even if exchanges of gifts or money took place.

**In Uganda, interviews with six children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse indicated that the children reported to the police only after they had received support from a trusted person to do so.**

This was confirmed by professionals working in the courts in South Africa who told *Disrupting Harm* that most formal reports are made by, or together with, family and friends of the child who was abused.

A good working relationship between law enforcement and frontline social workers also facilitates formal reporting. *Disrupting Harm* interviews with children and their caregivers identified that they frequently disclosed first to non-governmental organisations which supported and assisted with reporting via formal mechanisms such as the police.

**Analysis also indicated that mandatory reporting requirements (such as for medical practitioners, social workers, teachers, local councillors and internet service providers) may enhance formal reporting to law enforcement.**

For example, in Namibia and Malaysia all citizens are mandated by law to report when they become aware that children are involved in the creation of child sexual abuse material.

## Once reported, the pathway to conviction of offenders has many obstacles

Children and caregivers who participated in interviews about their engagement with justice processes frequently described feelings of confusion and helplessness throughout police investigations and court procedures. They spoke of receiving little information about what processes to expect, how long procedures would take, or even who would be involved. They regularly had to actively follow up themselves to ensure cases progressed – particularly at the investigation stages.

**Many respondents also noted that they felt the crimes were not taken seriously or that they felt they were being blamed for what occurred.**

Blame was particularly prevalent in instances where a child had been groomed by offenders, had accepted money or gifts, or had created the images or videos of themselves (usually through coercion or manipulation) that they are now extorted with, or that had been shared without their permission.

> The police did not do their duties. I was really hurt when I went and reported my case to them, and they did not help me. They did not take action. I felt bad. [...] When I told them my problem, they were blaming me, asking me why I would do such a thing and why I behaved like that.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Uganda



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Suspicions of corruption were mentioned by some respondents when police officers had requested 'informal fees to proceed with investigations. In one instance a girl described that a police officer made a sexual advance while she was reporting. Many respondents described the length of the investigation processes as being excessive.

Some respondents reported feeling that the individual police officers that they encountered engaged with them carefully and respectfully, but even in these instances, information or clarity on the expected processes was still unavailable. However, at least knowing someone cared about them and would respond helped attenuate these challenges. In a few exemplary cases, both respectful engagements and full information were provided, empowering children and their caregivers. These examples must be held up proudly and become the norm for all:

> Someone explained the process to me at the station, I was told of my right to testify, and I felt good about knowing my rights. I got full information on how I could find justice for my child and as a result, I was able to support my child.
>
> **Caregiver of a Girl Survivor** Kenya

Where possible, children should be interviewed in child-friendly settings. 'Child Interview Centres established in Malaysia are a good example of a way to make children feel comfortable when discussing sensitive and difficult experiences. Other relatively simple ways to empower children is allowing them to choose who is in the room when they make their statements, to limit the number of people present to the bare minimum, and to give them the opportunity to select the gender of the police officer. Although not conducted consistently, this approach was noted and appreciated by victims from several of the *Disrupting Harm* countries.

> I selected a female officer because I felt she would understand me better compared to a male officer.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Namibia

**Many of the children and caregivers interviewed for *Disrupting Harm* never saw their cases proceed to court.**

When cases did proceed to court, the disempowerment of many children through these processes was striking. Children and caregivers gave accounts of the court processes that reflected they had little agency and were rarely consulted on whether they understood proceedings or their legal options.

**Children and caregivers spoke of complex, unfamiliar, technical language, witnessing discussions not appropriate for the age of the child and proceedings conducted in languages other than their mother tongue.**

Children spoke also of being asked to recount their experience numerous times and to many different people. They noted a real lack of privacy and confidentiality about these private, personal and traumatic experiences.

*Disrupting Harm* evidence indicates the need for more structured and protective processes when children enter the court system regarding online sexual exploitation and abuse. For example, when there is already sufficient evidence – such as images or videos, or when the accused has confessed – it is good practice to avoid requiring children to directly give evidence themselves in court. When there is a need to hear children in court, these sessions should be closed, limiting the number of people present.[9] Particularly difficult experiences were shared by some children who were forced to face their offenders in-person when in the courtroom. These circumstances should be avoided through the use of live video links, or at the very least protect the child from seeing the offender by hiding the offender from view (not by hiding the child from view).

> I felt so worried because the offenders were sitting behind me, and I was in the middle of the courtroom... They could hear what I was saying. I was afraid that they would hate it. I was afraid they would hate me, and one day... they would take revenge because I had ruined their futures.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Thailand



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A good practice was identified in South Africa where the Criminal Procedure Act allows child witnesses to submit evidence through intermediaries who speak on behalf of the child.[10] Another good practice identified, for instance in Kenya, Malaysia, Thailand and Uganda, was that of judges who requested a victim impact assessment to help guide them regarding sentencing. In a victim impact assessment, children have the opportunity to describe the impact that the crime has had on their lives. In the case of children, a social worker can speak on their behalf unless the child prefers to speak for themself.

## Comprehensive ongoing support is key to recovery

Justice processes represent both a stage of the recovery process that can facilitate 'moving on' as well as sometimes being a formality that provides access to trauma support.

> Recovery refers to a process whereby those who have exited the exploitative situation attempt to overcome difficulties associated with their exploitation, address physical, emotional and psychological health concerns, develop a sense of safety, develop protective attributes for resiliency, and (re)build relationships and skills to enable them to 'move on' with their lives.[11]

At the very minimum, free medical testing and emergency medical and psychological care has to be available.

**However, the *Disrupting Harm* data identified that these free services are not provided in all the 13 countries and in the countries where they are, they are frequently not available outside of urban areas.**

Access to psychosocial support was perceived by many of the interviewed children and their caregivers as another crucial element of recovery. However, *Disrupting Harm* evidence suggests that psychosocial services are not always provided by government, though they are sometimes provided by civil society organisations, if they are made available at all.

> I told her everything and she told me that I wasn't the first person and that it was almost normal nowadays and most of the youth have encountered the same. She encouraged me to talk face-to-face... The more I attended the more I heard others and I started feeling like I am healing inside and outside. I listened to other survivor stories and felt like I was healing.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Kenya

Legal aid services were frequently identified as under-resourced and available in limited geographic (urban) areas only. Notably, the children who were assisted by a lawyer did often have more positive experiences of the justice process evidencing the value of such vital services:

> The lawyer did make it easier and encouraged me to speak. I was worried and scared about what was happening, but she said, 'Don't worry, I will sort it out'.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Cambodia

Multidisciplinary 'One-Stop Crisis Centres' based in hospitals across in Thailand were noted as a promising practice in the research. These centres coordinate medical, legal and counselling services for victims of all kinds of violence. The centres were developed through cooperation between the Royal Thai Police, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Labour. In Tanzania[12] and Malaysia[13] there are similar initiatives.



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## Compensation was rarely obtained

Legal analysis for *Disrupting Harm* indicated that compensation may be sought and awarded to victims of online child sexual exploitation and abuse crimes in all *Disrupting Harm* countries. In most countries compensation may even be awarded within the criminal procedure – not requiring a separate civil proceeding.

**Nevertheless, no instances of children receiving compensation via the formal justice system were identified through the *Disrupting Harm* interviews.**

Seeking and obtaining compensation is not a well-established practice in the *Disrupting Harm* countries and many children and caregivers were not informed about their right to compensation or about the process as to how to obtain it.

Negotiating informal payments between children and the offender is undesirable as the offender is not held accountable before the law and may go on to abuse other children. *Disrupting Harm* evidence indicates that such informal settlements appear to be more common in cases where the offender is someone within the family or community. Informal settlements are sometimes even brokered by formal justice system professionals, for example by the police or judges. Sometimes compensatory settlements are part of the formal justice system, such as the plea-bargaining system used in the Philippines.[14] This is seen as a way to spare the child from going through the formal court process.

> I do not want to ask about money. It would be shameful to do that. I do not want anything to do with money – people may think I only want to profit money. I just want help, especially to find a psychiatrist for my younger child.
>
> **Caregiver of Girl Survivor** Philippines

The worst-case practice of an informal settlement is to force the victim to marry their offender, which according to interviews with justice professionals is still possible in some countries, albeit rarely occurs.

A best-case practice is an accessible fund managed by the government from which victims can claim compensation. Although such funds are established in Kenya[15] and Ethiopia,[16] no cases of children accessing them for online sexual exploitation or abuse were identified in the *Disrupting Harm* research.

## Conclusions

*Disrupting Harm* research identified a number of promising legislative approaches and targeted actions that can enable children to feel safe and confident to report, seek justice through the formal processes, and even to seek compensation. However, it is clear that work which enables legislation, and ensures implementation of best practice actions are essential for success.

*Disrupting Harm* also provides a unique insight into the status of this agenda through the voices of child survivors, and has identified a set of actionable solutions tailored to each country to inform policy makers and enable the required change.

Countries that take children s access to justice seriously need to prioritise:

- Creating, sustaining and promoting accessible pathways for children (and the trusted adults around them) to feel sufficiently safe and confident to formally report online child sexual exploitation and abuse;
- Supporting children and caregivers throughout the process of reporting, investigating and prosecuting offenders with child-sensitive justice practices. Good examples exist, but require ongoing maintenance through training, resourcing and advocacy;
- Ensure that victim compensation schemes and other legal remedies are not only part of the legislative response, but that these services are known, accessible and used by children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.



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It is expected that many of the challenges identified through the first set of Disrupting Harm national assessments in 12 countries are present in other parts of the world, but with important differences both in children s experiences, and in each countries capacity and readiness to prevent and respond effectively.

This reinforces the need for high-quality, comprehensive, national evidence-generation efforts to determine the extent to which children are exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and how prevention and response capabilities can be improved.

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1. Qua tat ve nterv ews were conducted w th the fo ow ng part c pants n each country. Kenya: 10 g r s and 10 careg vers, Uganda: 6 g r s and 3 careg vers, Nam b a: 6 g r s and 5 careg vers, Cambod a: 3 g r s, 3 boys, and 3 careg vers, Ph pp nes: 3 g r s and Tha and: 6 g r s and 3 careg vers. Methodo ogy for the access to ust ce nterv ews w th OCSEA v ct ms and the r careg vers.

2. Qua tat ve nterv ews were conducted w th profess ona s work ng n the ust ce system n: Kenya: 11, Uganda: 11, Tanzan a: 10, Nam b a: 10, South Afr ca: 10, Cambod a: 10, ndones a: 10, Ma ays a: 10, Ph pp nes: 8, Tha and: 11. Methodo ogy of the access to ust ce nterv ews w th ust ce profess ona s.

3. Th s represents 11,912 of the tota ch dren across 12 countr es (South Afr ca was exc uded from the ana ys s due to methodo og ca d fferences w th the too used wh ch proh b ted co ect ve ana ys s). Method: Nat ona y representat ve househo d survey w th nternet us ng ch dren and the r careg vers.

4. South Afr ca s exc uded from th s ana ys s due to a ack of comparab ty w th the survey tems used.

5. Th s represents 1,059 ch dren from 11,912 ch dren n 12 countr es (South Afr ca was exc uded from the ana ys s). The four c ear examp es were: offered money or g fts n return for sexua mages or v deos; were offered money or g fts on ne to meet someone n person to do someth ng sexua ; someone shared sexua mages of them w thout the r consent or someone threatened or b ackma ed them on ne to engage n sexua act v t es.

6. Ch dren fe t ashamed, were worr ed to get nto troub e, d d not th nk anyone wou d understand the r s tuat on, fe t they had done someth ng wrong or thought no one wou d understand them or the r s tuat on.

7. Eth op a, ndones a (Aceh prov nce), Kenya, Ma ays a, Nam b a, Tanzan a, Uganda.

8. Josenhans, V., Kavenagh, M., Sm th, S., & Weker e, C. (2020). Gender, r ghts and respons b t es: The need for a g oba ana ys s of the sexua exp o tat on of boys. Ch d Abuse & Neg ect, 110 (1), 6.

9. UNODC and UN CEF. (2006). Un ted Nat ons Gu de nes on Just ce n matters nvo v ng ch d v ct ms and w tnesses of cr me.

10. Repub c of South Afr ca. (1977). Cr m na Procedure Act No. 51 of 1977 (as amended n 2013), Sect on 170A.

11. ECPAT nternat ona & nternat ona Centre for Research on CSE, V o ence and Traffick ng. (2017). Connect ng the dots: Support ng the Recovery and Re ntegrat on of Ch dren Affected by Sexua Exp o tat on. 22.

12. Tanzan a: One Stop Centres. ECPAT, NTERPOL, and UN CEF. (2022). D srupt ng Harm n Tanzan a: Ev dence on on ne ch d sexua exp o tat on and abuse. G oba Partnersh p to End V o ence aga nst Ch dren. 72

13. One Stop Cr s s Centres. ECPAT, NTERPOL, and UN CEF. (forthcom ng) D srupt ng Harm n Ma ays a: Ev dence on on ne ch d sexua exp o tat on and abuse. G oba Partnersh p to End V o ence aga nst Ch dren.

14. Man a Standard. (May 21, 2021) P ea barga n ng demyst fied. Ensur ng that the ch d's best nterests are reflected n th s process s a so descr bed n the aw d rect y Repub c of the Ph pp nes. (2003). Ant Traffick ng n Persons Act of 2003 (RA 9208), Sect on 11(c).

15. Repub c of Kenya. (2014). V ct m Protect on Act No. 17 of 2014. Part V.

16. Repub c of Eth op a. (2015). Proc amat on No. 909/2015 on the Prevent on and Suppress on of Traffick ng n Person and Smugg ng of M grants. Art c e 32.



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# CHILDREN'S DISCLOSURES OF ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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- ***Disrupting Harm* data challenges assumptions about the pathways to disclosure that children prefer. People trusted and close are far more frequently preferred than formal mechanisms.**
- **Up to a third of children told nobody at all. Nearly half said this was because they didn't know where to go or whom to tell.**
- **Children have little choice but to be online to participate in everyday life. They need specific and practical guidance about doing so safely so that when things go wrong, they don't feel responsible.**

**Data is presented here from research activities undertaken for *Disrupting Harm* including interviews with law enforcement, child helplines, justice professionals and children – including children who had been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. Nationally representative household surveys were also conducted, and data from 11,912 internet-using children and their caregivers across 12 countries is also presented here.[1] Most of the quantitative data referred to in this document is from children who had been subjected to clear instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year (1,059 children).**

## There are many ways for child sexual exploitation and abuse to come to light. People often assume that children will turn to the police, social services or family members to disclose, but this is rarely the case.

In the *Disrupting Harm* countries, little was known about who children speak to when they have been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse, and why those who do not speak to anyone choose to stay silent.

**Defining online child sexual exploitation and abuse**

Situations involving *digital, internet* and *communication technologies* at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

1. Data from South Afr ca was not nc uded n th s br ef due to d fferences n the survey too used wh ch prevented comparat ve ana ys s.



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**The *Disrupting Harm* data reveals insights into some of the drivers behind children's decision-making regarding disclosure and help-seeking, as well as other influencing factors that may be present.**

## What have we learned about children's disclosures?

All children who participated in the household surveys were asked an open question about who they would go to if something negative happened to them. A majority of children (65%) said that they would talk to their friends, and almost all agreed that people in their family would help them if they had problems (91%).

Yet for those children who had been actually subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse, the reality was frequently different.

**A considerable proportion of children who experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse did indeed chose to talk about these sensitive and highly personal issues with their friends (40%), with siblings being the second most common choice (24%).**

**Relatively few children across these 13 countries sought help from their caregivers:** Only 21% sought help from a female caregiver and 19% from a male caregiver.

**Almost no children surveyed turned to the police, helplines or to a social worker:** Out of the 1,059 children who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse, only 2.5% had contacted a social worker, 3% had contacted a helpline, and 2.9% had contacted police. *Disrupting Harm* law enforcement data confirmed this, by indicating that reports of online child sexual exploitation and abuse usually come to specialist police units from other law enforcement agencies and adults, but rarely directly from children themselves. In Mozambique and Viet Nam no child called a helpline and in Namibia, Tanzania, Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam no child went to the police.

**Approximately one in three (34%) children who experienced online sexual abuse did not tell anyone at all, and there were no differences by age or between boys and girls.**

These findings are alarming as a considerable number of children likely received no help at all for what they had been through, which could result in a range of long-term impacts on their health and wellbeing. No child should have to suffer such things alone.

> [I told ] no one, that was my own little skeleton I put it back into the closet until I was ready to deal with it one day.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Namibia

These findings show that many of the people and the services we hope children will seek help from, are often not even informed about children s experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse. This makes the task of supporting children difficult, or even impossible, for those with a duty of care to protect them.

**It also raises the question of *why* children are currently not comfortable to disclose to caregivers, law enforcement, helplines or social workers, and what needs to change so that these support mechanisms are seen as a realistic alternative by children.**

## Impacts on children's decision to disclose

Looking across the evidence generated from *Disrupting Harm*, a number of factors stand out as critical for children to disclose experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse.

**Being sure they would not face judgement and assuming that the trusted people would keep their confidence were vital influences on children's decision-making.**

Shame, victim-blaming and knowledge gaps about abuse or what to do – for both children and those providing help and support – also played a major role in children s decision to report or not.



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## Inner circle... or nobody at all?

Results from interviews and surveys with children who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse revealed that these children frequently had someone close to them that they trusted who they could reach out to for help.

**However, these supporting people, including same-aged peers, are not always equipped with the knowledge of how to respond, or how to connect them to professional services for these serious issues.**

For same-aged peers, it places a heavy burden on them that they should not need to carry alone.

Caregivers surveyed for *Disrupting Harm* responded that if their child was abused or harassed, they would report it to the police (49%) or to a social support worker (21%).

**This occurred in some instances, with children interviewed for *Disrupting Harm* describing how important caregiver support was to them in navigating extended law enforcement and court processes.**

One young survivor from Cambodia described how her father had made the initial complaint and accompanied her throughout the interview and evidence gathering process: *"At the time, I had told my dad everything and next, he was the one who made the complaint to the police I felt I wanted him there and when not alone, I wasn't scared "* (Girl Survivor, Cambodia). Another child was brought to the police by her mother, and she pointed to this as one of the factors that allowed her to feel more comfortable: *"I was with my mom I knew she was going to protect me "* (Girl Survivor, Namibia).

**Yet, in other instances, children's comments highlighted that their caregivers lacked the knowledge to understand what they had experienced. Some caregivers actively discouraged disclosing abuse outside of the family or opposed making formal reports:**

*"I couldn't really open up to my mom about it and at a later stage when I told her about what happened with my brother, what my brother did, she said, okay it's a family issue let's just leave it as it is, let's not cause problems "* (Girl Survivor, Namibia).

In fact, sometimes family responses represented real victim-blaming. A survivor from Malaysia recalled that when she disclosed, her father s response was very unhelpful: *"[He asked me} Why did you do that?' when the question should have been like, Why did he do that to you?'"* (Girl Survivor, Malaysia)

> I just never talk about those feelings at my house because no-one asks how I am.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Cambodia

### Listen, ask and report

A number of the young survivors shared that their families and friends were unsure as to what they could do to help them. People who may receive disclosures from children need to be informed to listen to them, not judge or blame them for what happened, provide emotional support and then focus on finding solutions. Helplines can be used as a source of information about how to best support a child who has suffered abuse. Everyone needs to learn to be proactive and observe the warnings signs – changes in children s behaviour can indicate that something distressing has happened.

## Child helplines

Previous research has established that when children turn to helplines, there are many positive impacts.[2] Child helplines can be a resource for children to access general psychosocial support, for triage and connecting children to other services, or for parents and frontline workers to learn about and access support services.[3,4]

Recent evidence also shows that children in Asia and Africa decide to call helplines most often for concerns like their physical and mental health, violence, education, family relationships and facilitating access to support services.[5]

2. Math eu, S. L., Udd n, R., Brady, M., Batche or, S., Ross, V., Spence, S. H., Wat ng, D., & Kõ ves, K. (2021). Systemat c Rev ew: The State of Research nto Youth He p nes. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(10), 1190 1233.

3. Fukk nk, R.G., Bruns, S., L gtvoet,R. (2016). Vo ces of Ch dren from Around the G obe; An nternat ona Ana ys s of Ch dren's ssues at Ch d He p nes. *Children & Society*; 30: 510 519.

4. van Do en, W., We nberg, C. B. (2019). An Emp r ca nvest gat on of Factors Affect ng Perce ved Qua ty and We Be ng of Ch dren Us ng an On ne Ch d He p ne. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(12), 2193.

5. Ch d He p ne nternat ona (2021). Vo ces dur ng the COV D 19 pandem c.



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Yet, child protection professionals surveyed for *Disrupting Harm* frequently named the promotion of helplines as a way to support children who had been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. These services are also regularly put forward by governments and other experts seeking to address child sexual abuse and exploitation.

**But, as *Disrupting Harm* evidence shows, helplines are not utilised by children themselves to disclose abuse and seek help – children would much rather speak with trusted people close to them.**

Child helplines are a key component in a strong child protection system. But with only 3% of children across these 13 countries calling a helpline for support for online sexual exploitation and abuse, findings suggest that helplines do not facilitate disclosure and reporting by children. To enable children to disclose cases of online sexual exploitation and abuse and access help, there is a need to also look at alternative options.

***Disrupting Harm* evidence shows that children prefer to disclose within their existing interpersonal networks, therefore interventions that focus on equipping people who may be likely to receive first disclosures with knowledge of how to prevent further harm, and connect children to appropriate support, may be helpful.**

In parallel, child helplines may benefit from investing in further research to understand how they can become a more attractive and useful option for children who wish to disclose experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse and seek help.

### Helplines as an information source

Promote messaging that helplines can be used in different ways, as a source of information about how to support children subjected to online sexual abuse and exploitation, not only for children to disclose or report. Awareness-raising efforts should target people in contact with children – peers, siblings, caregivers and teachers – explaining that helplines can provide information and links to local support services. Adequate resources and training for helpline personnel about online child sexual exploitation and abuse will help them to provide good quality information and referrals.

## Awareness is lacking

**Of the 34% of children who did not disclose their experiences to anyone, nearly half said it was because they didn't know where to go or whom to tell.**

Some children (10%) chose not to disclose because they didn t think anyone would believe them or understand what they went through. Highlighting an opportunity for effective interventions, children who took part in the survivor conversations for *Disrupting Harm* mentioned that schools and community networks were the least intimidating settings in which to ask for help.

### Support improved knowledge of frontline workers

Established child protection systems can accommodate support for online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse when professionals are adequately equipped with necessary knowledge and skills. There is no need to treat *online* sexual exploitation and abuse as a new and different topic; frontline workers need to be trained to adapt their responses to appropriately deal with the variations of child sexual abuse that technology brings within existing psychosocial support. Children need to see with their own eyes that disclosure will be handled with care and confidentiality. Seeing well-handled cases may encourage other children to seek help themselves.

## Shame and blame

**Children subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse felt vulnerable, scared, embarrassed, or upset.**

One in five of those who did not disclose to anyone said it was because they felt embarrassed, or that it would be too emotionally difficult to speak about. A girl from Namibia explained how these feelings manifest: *"What will they say? What will the community say? That's where the fear started coming in whereby my reputation will be ruined and I don't know what this man will say about me and what people will think"* (Girl Survivor, Namibia). Furthermore, common social norms perpetuating discomfort or embarrassment when discussing sex can make it difficult for children to disclose sexual exploitation and abuse.



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**If adults are visibly uncomfortable with questions about sex, children will be less likely to broach the topic in order to disclose sexual abuse or raise concerns.**

This reduces the opportunity for effective preventative, early identification and supportive actions.

Some of the child survivors interviewed who had made disclosures to caregivers or frontline professionals described feeling blamed for what they had been subjected to. A girl from Thailand explained: *"The police said it was late, and why we were not at home I explained to them what happened Then they said, Why did you go out at night?' They seemed to want to blame me for what had happened "* (Girl Survivor, Thailand). When talking about interactions with justice professionals, a child in Kenya shared: *"They blamed me for my situation saying that I asked for it, so they were asking why I was reporting it "* (Girl Survivor, Kenya).

In other examples, children blamed themselves for their victimisation due to common narratives around the dangers of being online.

**Frequently, children are told that 'the internet is dangerous,' yet today they have little choice but to be online to participate in everyday life, learn and engage socially with others. With little concrete guidance to help them navigate safely, they will engage anyway. If something goes wrong, they can feel responsible that the offenders have successfully victimised them.**

> I did it [went online] behind her [mother's] back, without her knowledge so with them, yes, it is my fault because I still did it even though I knew it was wrong. She said she didn't know how else to guide me.
>
> **Girl Survivor** Malaysia

As many as 10% of children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse said that the reason they did not disclose this experience to anyone was because they felt that they had done something wrong. Interviews with survivors repeatedly demonstrated this type of thinking amongst child survivors across all countries. One child from Malaysia said: *"I knew I was wrong, and I made a mistake, so I knew I was in here on my own doing "* Similarly, a girl from Namibia said: *"It made me feel really bad because I knew I contributed in a way "* (Girl Survivor, Namibia).

## Learn about the online world and be a safety partner

Caregivers must improve their understanding of digital platforms and technologies and engage with children around their online activities, habits, and interpersonal engagements. Talk with children about how they interact with others online, as one would in real life. Talk about online risks, and about what to do if they encounter harm. Aim to learn together (see *Start the chat*[6] as an example). Reassure children that they can turn to you if something bothers them online and that they won t be judged or blamed for what happened.

When children do not know about sex, it enables offenders to take advantage. Foster environments where children are comfortable to ask questions and raise concerns about sex with adults without embarrassment or shame. Awareness raising messages and responses to disclosures must clearly convey that sexual exploitation and abuse is *never* the child s fault, regardless of any circumstances.

## The context in which abuse occurs

Of concern is that 9% of children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse did not think that it constituted something serious enough to report. Interviews with survivors illustrated that such thinking was present amongst children. *"Funny that all along I never thought of it as an abuse, I never considered it, but talking to my cousin made me realise that I was used and abused and I said, okay, I will not talk to this person again "* (Girl Survivor, Namibia).

6. The Austra an eSafety Comm ss oner's programme 'Start the Chat' encourages careg vers to ta k w th the r ch dren about the r ves on ne.



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***Disrupting Harm* data reveals that there is a pervasive lack of knowledge – amongst children and adults – about what constitutes online child sexual exploitation and abuse. There is also a belief that if a child 'agrees' or initiates contact, this somehow reduces the responsibility of the offender. There is an urgent need to change these views.**

In a survivor conversation, a child from Cambodia demonstrated this thinking: *"And when the police arrested us, the police said you are a victim We didn't understand that we are a victim...I think we are not a victim because we agreed to go by ourselves"* (Girl Survivor, Cambodia).

Data from the *Disrupting Harm* surveys and interviews with survivors shows that offenders also included caregivers or relatives of children. In this situation, children can be particularly reluctant to tell police officers, social workers or other experts about the abuse and exploitation that they are suffering.

**Children are aware that disclosure could result in the punishment of a family member and have significant impacts on the family – a difficult choice that can generate feelings of guilt or fear of repercussions.**

Of those subjected to clear examples of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the *Disrupting Harm* sample, 3% said that they did not disclose because they did not want the person responsible to get in trouble.

## Abuse is never the child's fault

Children need to be made aware that all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse are unacceptable, regardless of how contact was initiated or who the offender is. Without a sound understanding of what constitute abuse and that it is not their fault under any circumstances, children can falsely assume that their actions somehow brought about the abuse and be reluctant to disclose or seek help.

It is expected that many of the challenges identified through the first set of *Disrupting Harm* national assessments are present in other parts of the world, but with important differences both in children s experiences, and in each countries capacity and readiness to prevent and respond effectively.

This reinforces the need for high-quality, comprehensive, national evidence-generation efforts to determine the extent to which children are exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and how prevention and response capabilities can be improved.

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DATA INSIGHT 1

# CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN 12 COUNTRIES IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

unicef
Office of Research-Innocenti

**About the *Data Insights* series from *Disrupting Harm***

*Disrupting Harm* is a research project conceived and funded by the End Violence Fund through its Safe Online Initiative. The project is implemented by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF and generates national evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response.

So far, new evidence about online child sexual exploitation and abuse has been collected through *Disrupting Harm* in thirteen countries: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Viet Nam). Up to nine primary research activities were undertaken in each country including surveys and interviews with more than 13,000 children, as well as caregivers, and other professionals with child protection mandates. Thirteen country reports were published in 2022, presenting the consolidated findings of all activities conducted within each country, along with targeted recommendations developed together with national stakeholders. Country reports can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF are used as the basis for the *Disrupting Harm* Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organisation(s) that produced each brief. While the *Disrupting Harm* project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organisations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

- ***Disrupting Harm* data shows that across 12 countries, anywhere between 1–20% of children had experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year.**
- **Generally, girls and boys are experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse in fairly equal proportions. There are no clear patterns by age, though more older children were noted in most of the 12 countries.**
- **Scaled to the population, data shows that tens of thousands, or even millions, of children in each country are being subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse each year.**

**For one of the research activities, *Disrupting Harm* gathered insights directly from children through a household survey, about a range of different experiences that can constitute online sexual exploitation and abuse. Nationally representative random samples[1] of approximately 1,000 children aged 12 to 17 were obtained in each of seven countries from Eastern and Southern Africa, and six countries in Southeast Asia between December 2020 and April 2021. Data is presented from 11,912 of those children in 12 countries, on their self-reported experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse.[2]**

As children s online engagement increases globally, the incidents of violence that a considerable proportion of children are subjected to in settings such as schools, communities or families, are also occurring via digital interactions. Sexual exploitation and abuse occur through social media, on gaming platforms or via direct digital messaging.

Digital technology can also facilitate in-person sexual exploitation and abuse against children and make addressing it more difficult. Offenders seeking to sexually exploit and abuse children today use

**Defining online child sexual exploitation and abuse**

Situations involving *digital, internet* and *communication technologies* at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

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**Figure 1:** Estimated proportions of internet-using children aged 12–17 who experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to being surveyed.

| Country | Total | Boys | Girls | 12–14 | 15–17 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Philippines | 20.2% | 21.8% | 19.0% | 18.2% | 22.0% |
| Uganda | 18.0% | 16.0% | 20.6% | 8.1% | 22.1% |
| Mozambique | 13.4% | 11.3% | 15.6% | 13.1% | 13.5% |
| Kenya | 12.2% | 13.4% | 11.2% | 8.9% | 14.9% |
| Cambodia | 11.4% | 13.4% | 9.2% | 14.4% | 8.5% |
| Ethiopia | 10.6% | 11.5% | 8.8% | 8.8% | 11.2% |
| Thailand | 9.2% | 8.7% | 9.5% | 10.3% | 8.2% |
| Namibia | 9.1% | 8.5% | 9.7% | 6.1% | 11.4% |
| Malaysia | 4.0% | 3.9% | 4.0% | 3.7% | 4.2% |
| Tanzania | 3.6% | 3.9% | 3.1% | 3.0% | 4.0% |
| Indonesia | 2.2% | 2.1% | 2.3% | 2.4% | 2.1% |
| Viet Nam | 0.7% | 0.5% | 0.9% | 0.8% | 0.6% |

technology to contact, groom or abuse children directly. Images and videos depicting in-person child sexual abuse can be accessed, sold and shared more widely and rapidly than ever before.

There is a growing sense of urgency to understand and tackle sexual exploitation and abuse of children, including abuse that occurs online or is facilitated by digital technologies. But the extent to which children in different countries experience online sexual exploitation and abuse is still unknown. Reliable data on its prevalence is scarce, partly because of the ethical and methodological challenges of measuring such a personal and sensitive experience,[3] but also due to an inconsistent and often unclear understanding of how child sexual abuse manifests in the digital environment.

Reported child sexual abuse material[4] circulated online is frequently used to estimate the scale of this problem. While this is a useful data point, quantifying reported child sexual abuse materials only captures materials that have already been identified, frequently includes older and recirculated materials and only quantifies sexual abuse that resulted in the production of abuse materials that were shared or stored online. In other words, it presents a limited picture of the extent to which children experience online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

## Children's experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse across 12 countries

In the *Disrupting Harm* household survey, children were asked whether they had experienced different actual or potential forms of online sexual exploitation and abuse.[5] For this analysis only four clear examples of online sexual exploitation and abuse were included.

Children were asked if ***in the past year***, they had experienced any of the following:

1. Someone offered you money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos
2. Someone offered you money or gifts online 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

If a child responded 'Yes to any one of these, the respondent was counted in the aggregated figure as having been subjected to a clear instance of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year. Aggregated results for the 12 countries are presented in Figure 1 above.

***Disrupting Harm* data show that across the 12 countries, anywhere between 1–20% of children had experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year.**

While most countries ranged between 9 per cent to 20 per cent, four of the 12 countries showed substantially lower rates. The variation in results is likely related to what children in these countries are actually experiencing, but may also reflect more extensive under-reporting, or differences in how the surveys were conducted within some of the countries. Research is therefore encouraged that – like the *Disrupting Harm* approach – collects multiple sources of data alongside surveys to ensure the most valid representations of this sensitive topic.



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## Gender

Looking across the data from the 12 countries, there are no clear overall patterns in terms of gender differences.

**Although slightly more boys reported sexual abuse in some countries and girls in others, the differences are minor, suggesting that generally, girls and boys are experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse in fairly equal proportions.**

This result suggests the need for interventions that target all children, girls and boys alike. Specific interventions that are sensitive to boys and girls could also elevate effectiveness.

## Age

In terms of age, the *Disrupting Harm* data for the African countries showed that proportionately more of 15–17-year-old children had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse compared with those aged 12–14 years. This pattern is seen in some of the Asian countries as well. However, it was not the case in Cambodia or Thailand, where it was more common for younger children aged 12–14 to report these experiences. This data should inform the different interventions that are necessary for different age groups, and as recommended throughout the *Disrupting Harm* national reports, tailored age-appropriate awareness-raising and education could be more effective.

## Conclusions

*Disrupting Harm* data highlights that, in two thirds of the 12 countries analysed, between 9 per cent and 20 per cent of children reported that they had experienced at least one instance of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to being surveyed. The estimates presented here are based on representative random samples, meaning that results are generalisable to national populations and can be scaled up by applying the proportions to census data.

**Scaled estimates presented in the national reports produced by *Disrupting Harm* show that tens of thousands, or even millions, of children in each country are being subjected to severe instances of online sexual abuse each year.**

Despite this sobering situation, pathways to effective action are evident. Governments in many of the countries where a *Disrupting Harm* assessment was conducted are already progressing in their national prevention and responses to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. With the addition of the comprehensive *Disrupting Harm* evidence and suggested recommendations, these governments will be able to take further action to tackle this critical issue.

The *Disrupting Harm* project highlights four critical challenges and recommendations for all countries involved:

1. **Awareness is low.** Invest in awareness raising campaigns that increase awareness of what online child sexual exploitation and abuse is, how to spot it, and how to seek help. These campaigns should be evidence-based, developed in consultation with children, and consistently evaluated for their reach and impact.
2. **Cooperation between internet service providers and law enforcement is not always working well.** Strengthening collaboration requires creating pathways for processing law enforcement data requests, training internet service provider staff to respond to data requests for ongoing cases and detecting and removing related content on their servers, as well as providing law enforcement authorities with associated information to help identify offenders and victims.
3. **Children rarely report their experiences to the police or helplines; they mostly disclose to people they know and trust.** Create resources to help people in the community provide support and facilitate formal disclosure and reporting. Programmes where people in the community are trained on what the reporting process involves, and how to listen and support children disclosing abuse, can be beneficial to those who have experienced these crimes. In parallel, efforts need to be made to strengthen trust between children and the public institutions and officials meant to support them, as otherwise children may remain unlikely to report.



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4. **Frontline workers, law enforcement and justice professionals often lack capacity, knowledge and resources to provide comprehensive and child-centered support to children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.** Invest in the knowledge of police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, statutory social workers, and frontline social workers on this topic. Regularly occuring, skill-based trainings should be mandatory, evaluated, and continuously updated in line with emerging evidence on children s experiences, digital development, and patterns of offending.

It is expected that many of the challenges identified through the first set of *Disrupting Harm* national assessments are present in other parts of the world, but with important differences both in children s experiences, and in each country s capacity and readiness to prevent and respond effectively.

This reinforces the need for high-quality, comprehensive, national evidence-generation efforts to determine the extent to which children are exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and how prevention and response capabilities can be improved.

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1. Wh e the qua ty of the samp es obta ned was h gh n a countr es, the cha enges of research ng pr vate and sens t ve exper ences nev tab y resu ts n some under report ng. Th s means that the true proport on of ch dren exper enc ng on ne sexua exp o tat on and abuse s ke y a b t h gher. t s suggested that the reader nterprets the est mates as *a good approximation* of the extent to wh ch nternet us ng ch dren n these countr es are sub ected to the forms of on ne sexua exp o tat on and abuse presented here.

2. Th s represents 11,912 of the tota ch dren across 12 countr es (South Afr ca was exc uded from the ana ys s due to methodo og ca d fferences w th the too used wh ch proh b ted co ect ve ana ys s). Data were co ected between December 2020 to Apr 2021. The samp e of approx mate y 1,000 ch dren n each country was a strat fied random c uster samp e w th random wa k w th n c usters. Ch dren were random y se ected at househo d eve f they were between the ages of 12 17 and had used the nternet at east once n the past three months.

3. ECPAT nternat ona (2019). Eth ca Cons derat ons n Research on Sexua Exp o tat on nvo v ng Ch dren. Bangkok: ECPAT nternat ona .

4. Ch d sexua abuse mater a ', refers to var ous forms of mater a s photos, v deos, aud o, any other record ng or representat on that dep ct acts of sexua abuse and/or focus on the gen ta a of a ch d. t s mportant to note that ch d sexua abuse mater a s the preferred term, subsum ng o der term no ogy such as 'ch d pornography'. nteragency Work ng Group on Sexua Exp o tat on of Ch dren. (2016). Term no ogy Gu de nes for the Protect on of Ch dren from Sexua Exp o tat on and Sexua Abuse. Tha and: ECPAT nternat ona , 40.

5. The *Disrupting Harm* househo d survey asks about a range of exper ences that can const tute ch d sexua exp o tat on and abuse. By actua forms, we refer to nstances that c ear y const tute sexua exp o tat on and abuse. By potent a forms, we refer to exper ences that n some cases const tute sexua exp o tat on and abuse but n other cases m ght not; for examp e, ch dren can be asked to share sexua mages w th someone e se on ne by an offender ntend ng to groom them, or by a romant c partner. The atter s not necessar y part of the *Disrupting Harm* defin t on of on ne sexua exp o tat on and abuse, un ess the mages are further shared w thout perm ss on, or used to b ackma or threaten the ch d.



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