



Children's experiences of sexual harassment and abuse on the internet



Pelastakaa Lapset - Rädda Barnen
Save the Children

Children's experiences of sexual harassment and abuse on the internet

The Helsinki Virtual Community Policing Group and Save the Children conducted a survey in June 2011 to investigate child sexual abuse on the internet.

The survey was carried out online and replied to anonymously. The questionnaire contained 18 questions, two of which allowed respondents to give free-form answers. Four Finnish online communities disseminated the link to the survey – IRC Galleria, Habbo, Demi and Aapeli – through which one could take part in the survey. The results reflect the respondent's experiences on a general level and do not concern problems encountered in individual online communities.

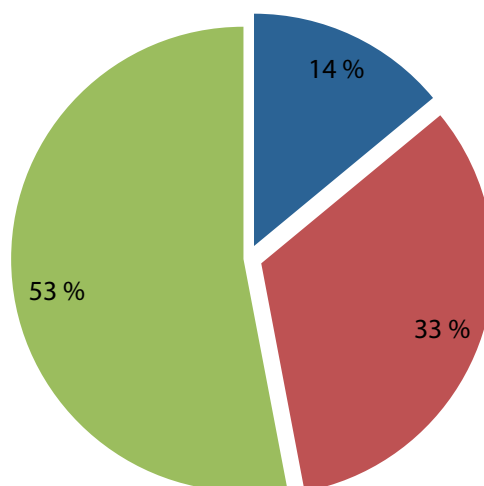
There were a total of 4,256 survey respondents. This report only examines the replies by respondents under the age of 16, who accounted for 54% (2,283) of the total number of respondents. 62% of the under 16-year-olds were girls and 38% were boys. 10% of all respondents indicated that they were under 12 years old.

It is not possible to verify the true age or gender of a person who answers an e-survey. With an anonymous survey a respondent may be tempted to depart from

the truth. There is therefore always a problem of reliability with surveys conducted over the internet. Answers that were clearly instances of trolling were removed from the survey results. Special attention was paid to the answers of respondents who indicated that they were under 12 years old, of whom 19 were eliminated on because of prank answers.

Respondent's age groups
(2,283 respondents)

■ 11 years or younger ■ 12-13 years ■ 14-15 years



A sexual act directed at a child by an adult is also a criminal offense on the internet

One in three survey respondents under 16 years of age said that they had been the recipients of sexually harassing messages, photos or videos from people who were clearly older than them or from adults. Almost half (46%) of girls had experienced this, as had 13% of boys.

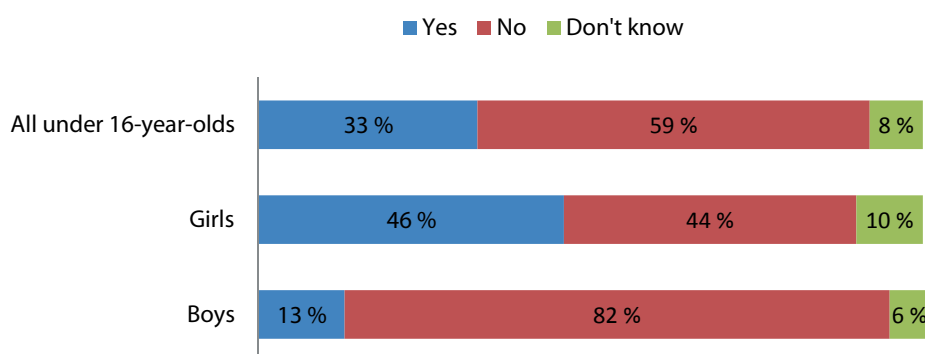
A sexual act directed at a child is no less a criminal of-

fense when it is committed over the internet. Sending messages, photos or videos of a sexual nature to under 16-year-olds in itself therefore constitutes a criminal offense.

“I’ve experienced this a lot in just one place: the internet.”

Has someone who is clearly older than you or an adult sent you sexually harassing messages, photos or videos over the internet?

(2,267 respondents)

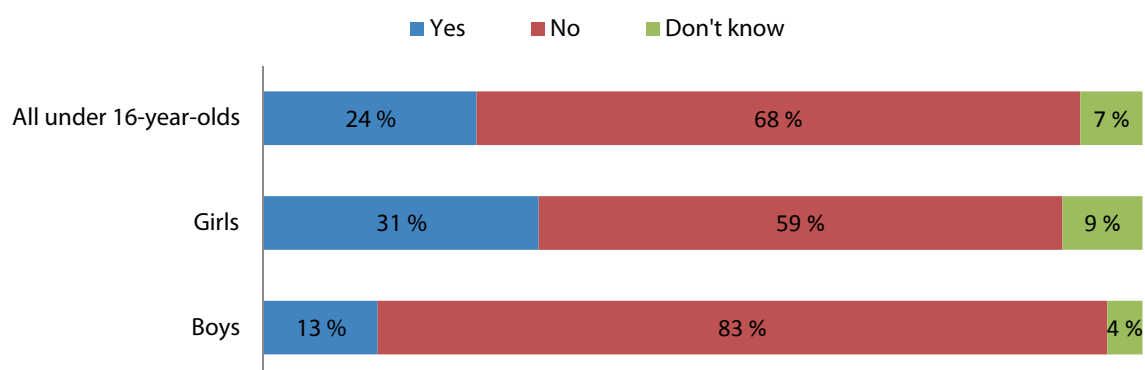


A quarter of all under 16-year-olds said that they had got into discussions of a sexual nature online with someone clearly older than themselves or with an adult that had concerned such things as having sex or genitalia. 31% of girls had experienced this, as had 13% of boys.

“I asked more questions, precise questions, for instance about school etc so I could find out his age... in the end I was a bit pushy and asked what his parents do for a living (the questioner was clearly an adult)... he reacted by going off-line when I said/lied that my father is a lawyer and my mother a police officer :)”

Have you got into discussions of a sexual nature with someone clearly older than you or with an adult (e.g. about having sex or about genitalia)?

(2,264 respondents)

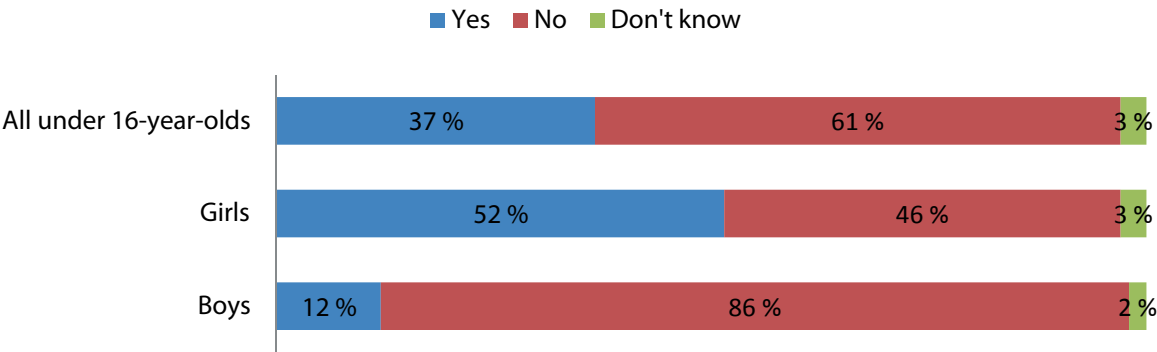


Photos and webcams

37% of respondents under 16 years old reported that someone had asked them online to send photos of themselves scantily dressed or naked. Over half of girls under 16 years of age had experienced this, as had over 10% of boys.

"I've never agreed to anything like that, because often those guys who say they're 13 years old are in fact much older."

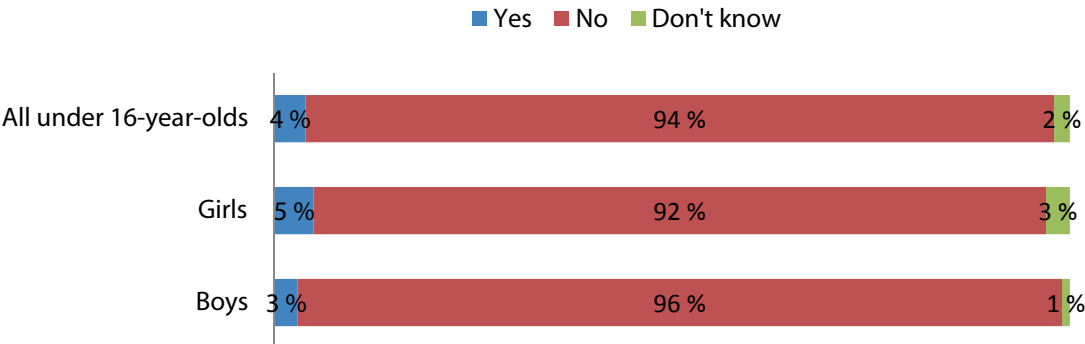
Has anyone sometime asked you to send photos of yourself scantily dressed or naked via the internet? (2,260 respondents)



Although girls in particular are frequently asked for sexually suggestive photos, only a few of the young respondents said that they had sent or uploaded images of themselves

scantily dressed or naked online. 5% of girls under 16 and 3% of boys answered the question affirmatively.

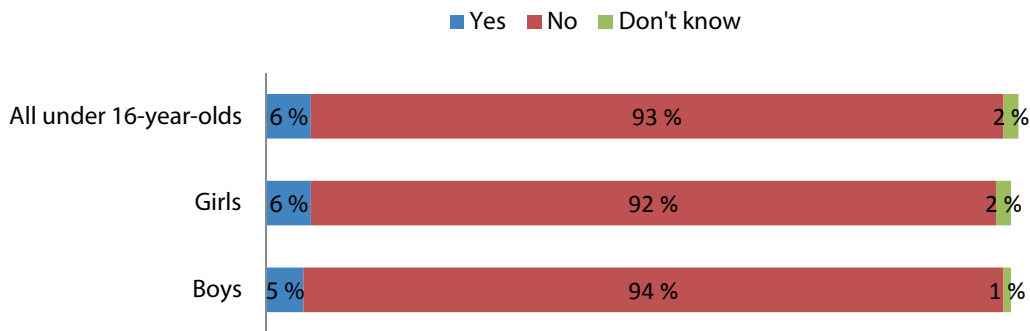
Have you uploaded or sent images of yourself scantily dressed or naked online? (2,256 respondents)



6% of under 16-year-olds said that someone had threatened to put photos of them scantily dressed or naked on the internet. There was no real difference between girls and boys in this respect.

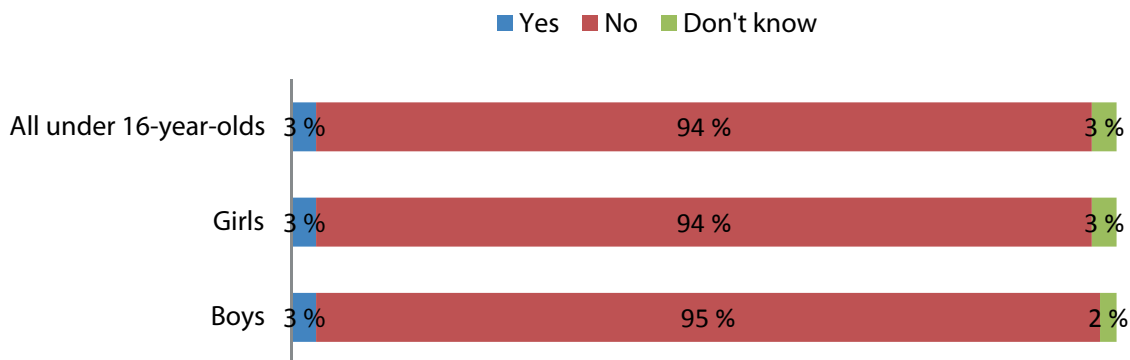
“I Can’t understand how some people could even put someone else’s photos online that spread throughout the internet like flu at school in winter.”

Has anyone threatened to put photos of you scantily dressed or naked on the internet?
(2,256 respondents)



3% of girls and boys who responded to the survey said that someone else had put photos of the respondent scantily dressed or naked on the internet.

Has someone else put photos of you scantily dressed or naked on the internet?
(2,258 respondents)

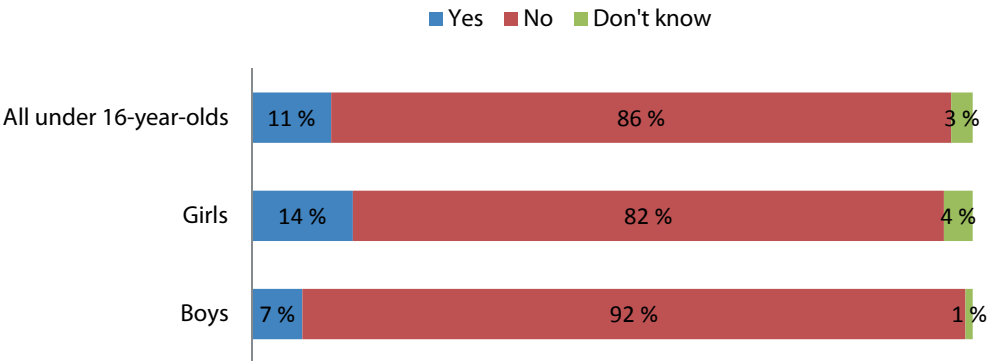


11% of all respondents under 16 years old said that they had been on webcam scantily dressed or naked. 14% of girls answered affirmatively to this, as did 7% of boys.

“I was drunk and appeared naked on webcam to a man who was clearly older. The man initially suggested everything and started to tempt me to do everything, praising my appearance. I ended up naked in front of the camera. I didn’t tell anyone about it, even though it upset me.”

“I Chatted on windows live messenger to someone who i’d just got to know online. this person started talking about all sorts of stuff to do with sex and eventually asked me to show my bum on the webcam. at first i refused but finally agreed under pressure from this person. i felt ashamed for a long time afterwards and i deleted the person from my contact list and blocked him. the next day this person sent me an email asking me not to tell anyone and saying hat he was sorry. i didn’t answer. it still disgusts me.”

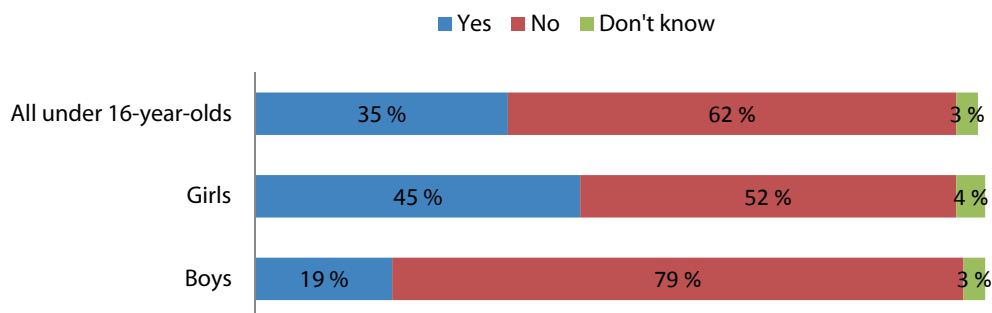
Have you appeared scantily dressed or naked on webcam?
(2,253 respondents)



Over a third of all respondents under 16 years old related that someone else had shown themselves to them scantily dressed or naked via webcam. 45% of girls reported this, as did one in five boys.

"Some people put out fun/joke sex remark, some have said that they're under 20 and jerk off in front of the web Cam – of course I turned the webcam off, don't feel like watching a +40 year-old man."

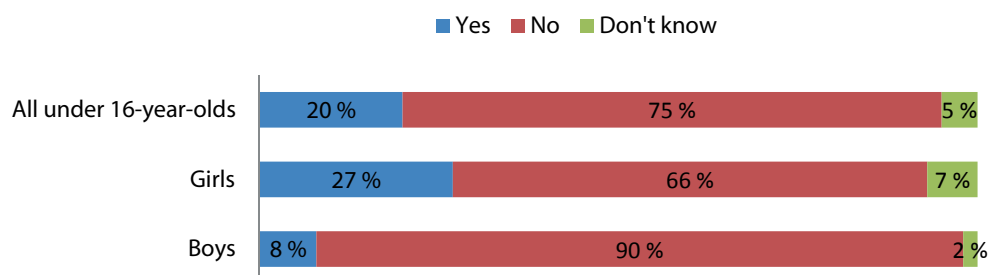
Has someone else shown him/herself to you scantily dressed or naked by webcam? (2,253 respondents)



One in five under 16-year-olds tell of having shown themselves by webcam scantily dressed or naked or, conversely, that someone who was clearly older than the respondent or who was an adult had shown themselves in such a way. 27% of girls answered affirmatively to this, as did 8% of boys.

"I've come across adult men on online chat forums (where you can use a webcam) who masturbate in front of the camera. I haven't had the camera switched on. They've maybe suggested something like 'let's see your tits'. I've never taken them seriously or replied. I've visited these sites just for fun, and haven't really taken the suggestions you get on open chat forums seriously. I don't give out my person info to others, so I feel safe."

Have you shown yourself scantily dressed or naked to, or been shown by, someone who is clearly older or an adult by webcam? (2,262 respondents)



Widespread online propositioning for sex

One in three of respondents under 16 years of age reported that they had been propositioned for sex online by an unknown person. Girls received sexual propositions for often than boys; nearly half (48%) of girls aged under 16 reported having received sexual propositions, as opposed to 15% of boys.

“I think sexual harassment is disgusting and I can’t understand how so many older men, even married ones, can proposition young girls. It ought to be stopped.”

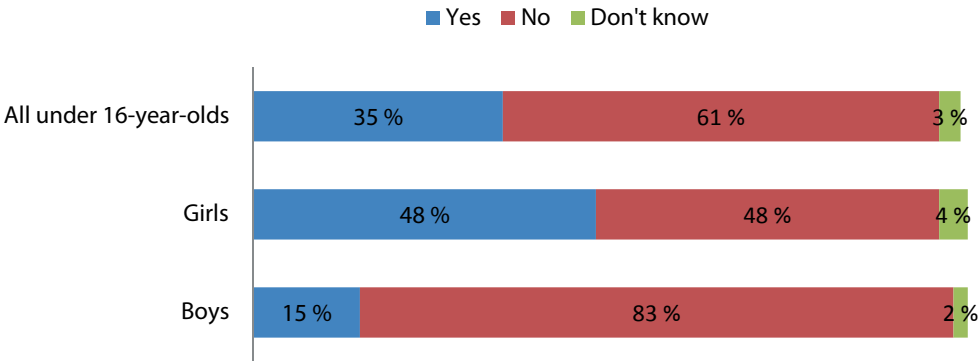
“A 47-year-old man started talking with me on messenger. He went on all the time that he was in love with me and sent me a photo of himself. I blocked him and haven’t heard anything more from him. This happened about two years ago. But I still don’t want it to come out or be checked out at all.”

“And often the web’s full of retards who can’t get a chick in real life and so desperately go begging online ‘cos there’s so much pressure.”

“Once I met a nice older Indian man in a chat room. We started to see one another a lot on Messenger, and it was nice. Then he suddenly asked me about my periods and asked why don’t I marry him. I started to get a bit worried, but I didn’t expect that he’d say that I’m sexy and tell me to touch myself. I refused and he said that I’d better obey him. I exited Messenger and deleted him from my list of friends. I’ve never heard from him since.”



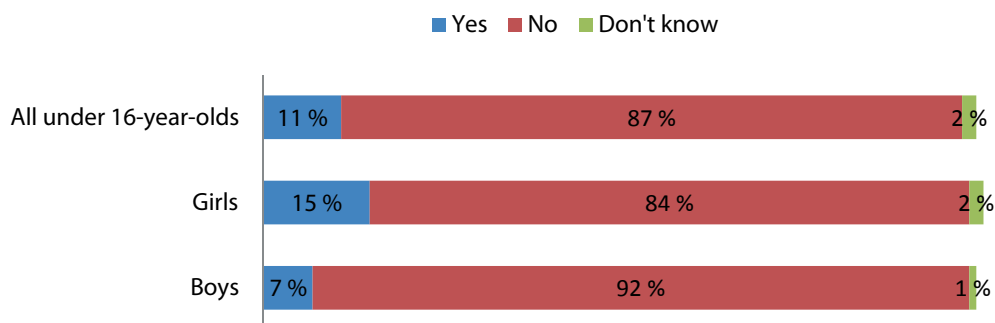
Has a stranger propositioned you online for sex?
(2,262 respondents)



One in 10 of under 16-year-olds reported that a stranger had offered them money or presents in return for

sex or sending their photos. 15% of girls and 7% of boys had been propositioned for sex or offered presents for it.

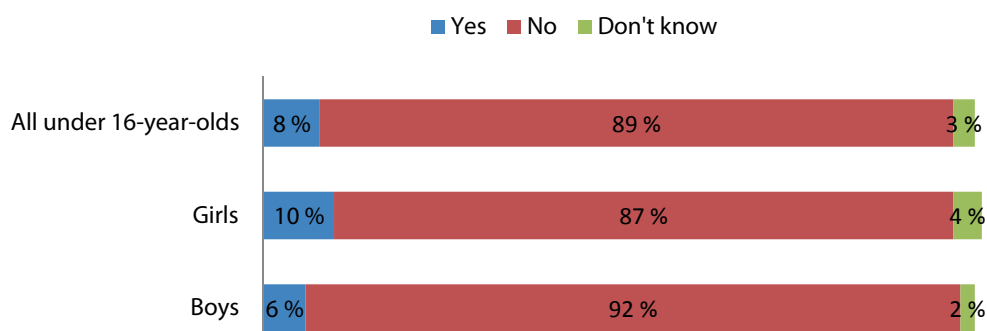
Has anyone asked you online for your photo or for sex and offered money or presents for it? (2,264 respondents)



8% of all under 16-year-olds reported that they had been met someone in real life who has propositioned them online to have sexual intercourse and who was clearly older than them or an adult. 10% of girls reported this, as did

6% of boys. Due to the way the question was put it was not apparent if the child was aware of the other party's age before meeting or whether they found out only in connection with meeting the stranger.

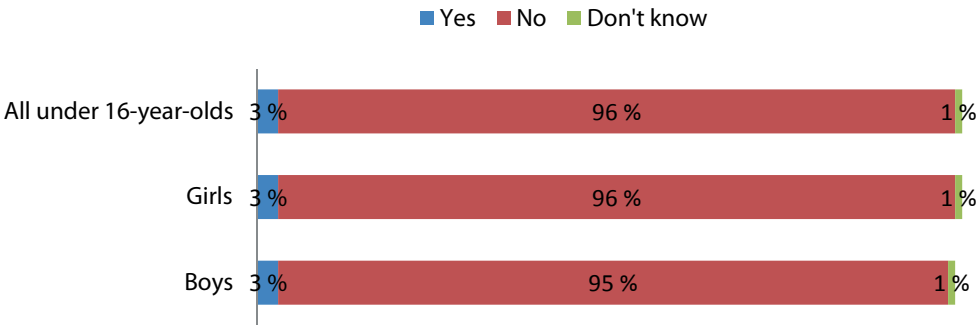
Have you met someone in real life who propositioned you online to have sexual intercourse and who was clearly older than you or an adult? (2,246 respondents)



3% of all under 16-year-old respondents reported having had sex with someone clearly older than them or an adult

who they got to know online. The percentage of girls and boys who had done so was the same.

Have you had sex with someone who is clearly older than you or an adult who you got to know online?
(2,258 respondents)



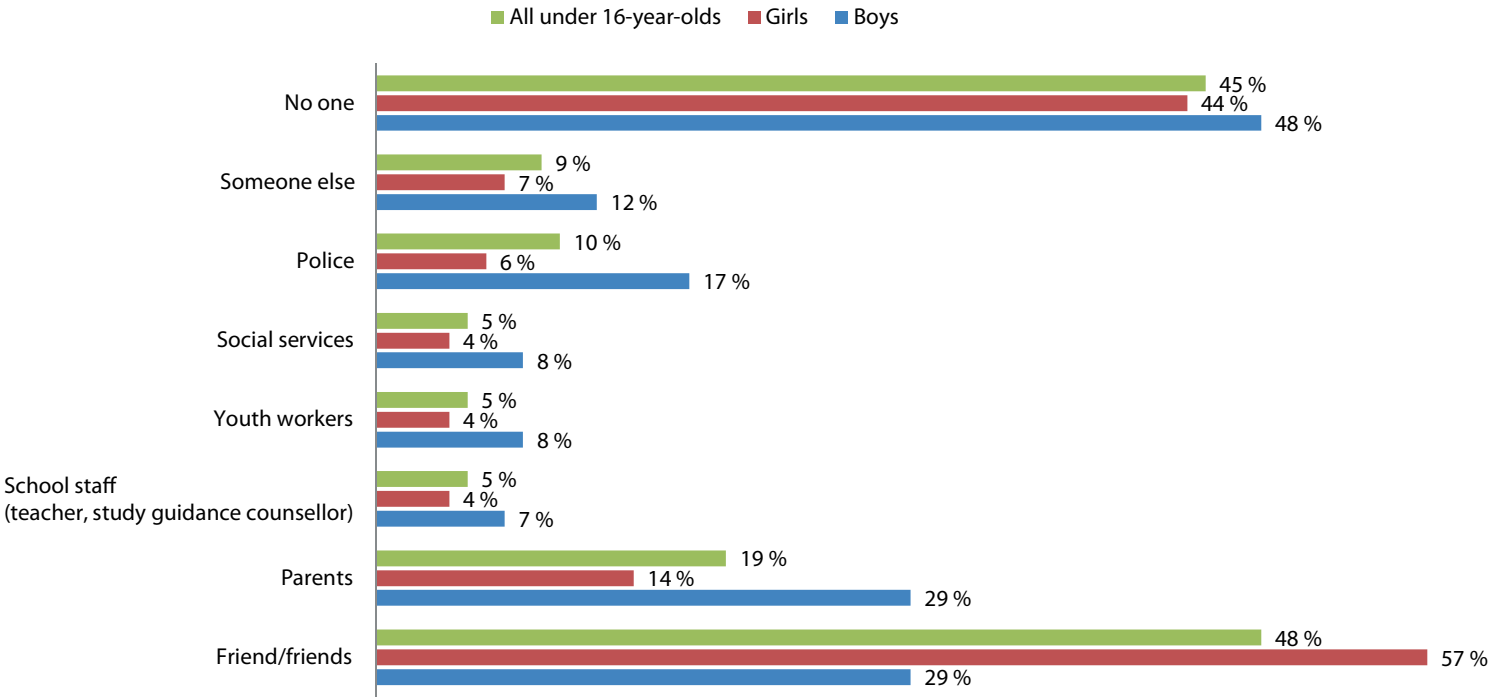
Sex crimes committed online rarely reported to the police

45% all under 16-year-old respondents had told no one about this (44% of girls and 48% of boys). In cases where the matter had been reported, it was mainly girls (57%) who had told their friends. Boys open up to friends more rarely (29%), but on the other hand had more often taken

the matter to the police (17%), their parents (29%) and other professionals.

“I turned off the computer and tried to forget about it. I wasn’t scared that someone would do my home because I never give out my personal information online.”

If someone has sexually harassed you online, who have you told? (1,731 respondents)



Increasing occurrence and prevalence of internet-related child sexual abuse

According to previous studies carried out in Finland, about 15-20% of teenage girls have been sexually harassed online by a person clearly older than them (Save the Children Reports: Child's Voice 2008, Familiar Strangers 2011). Fewer than 200 cases of internet-associated child sexual abuse and related attempts were reported to the police in 2010. The results of the June 2011 survey conducted by the Helsinki Virtual Community Policing Group and Save the Children strongly suggest that the internet-related sexual abuse of children may be a much broader problem than previously realised.

The opportunity offered by the internet has implicated people who would not otherwise necessarily be guilty of sexual offenses against children. Unlike with real life cases, those seeking to make sexual contacts with children online are often previously unknown to the children concerned. Those involved come from all social classes and as a rule those apprehended for such crimes have been men. The opportunities afforded by the internet for social interaction make the pursuit of contact with children by those with a sexual interest in them easy, and, what is

more, as things now stand the risk of getting caught may seem relatively slight under the perceived cover of anonymity. Perpetrators also find it easy to contact many children simultaneously.

The shame, guilt and fear felt by a child crime victim all too often prevents the case from coming out into the open and being reported. A child who is victim of an online sexual offense may not necessarily even understand the criminal nature of the communication. The child does not know how to comprehend an adult's sexual acts and approaches – for which the perpetrator alone is responsible – as being criminal in nature.

The biggest problem and challenge to do with the internet in sexual offenses is getting the perpetrator reported to the police. This is supported in the survey by the fact that only 10% of respondents who had been subject to sexual harassment said that they had brought the matter to the attention of the police. Nearly half of the under 16-year-old respondents had not told anyone that they had experienced sexual harassment.



When sexual harassment online is a crime

The sexual harassment of minors on the internet generally constitutes a crime. Chapter 20 of the Criminal Code defines sexual offenses in order to protect the individual's right to sexual self-determination. Offenses related to the internet can be found in Chapter 20, section 7 of the Criminal Code: the aggravated sexual abuse of a child, the sexual abuse of a child, the enticement of a child for sexual purposes, forcing a child to perform sexual acts, sexual abuse, the purchase of sexual services from a young person and as a consequence of an indecent sexual proposal involving a child. The most common sexual offence involving the internet clearly concerns the sexual abuse of children.

Even discussions of a sexual nature with an under 16-year-old in online constitutes child sexual abuse. Other forms of abuse include images to do with the perpetrator's or victim's genitalia and performance of a sexual nature in real time via webcam, for instance involving masturbation. Many instances of internet-based child sexual

abuse are such that the child concerned is involved in what is happening up to a certain point. The onus of responsibility, however, rests with the adult. Rape or coerced sexual intercourse may be related indirectly to the sexual offense committed via the internet. In this case at least one of party has to be physically having sex with the victim. A second perpetrator may watch and record the incident, for instance by webcam, and may order or incite the first party what he wants to be done to the child.

In addition to Chapter 20 of the Criminal Code, the offenses contained in Chapter 17 are also relevant to the internet, as they concern various offenses to do with child pornography. The aggravated distribution of sexually obscene pictures depicting children, the distribution of sexually obscene pictures, the possession of sexually obscene pictures of children and the publication of sexually obscene pictures are possible on the internet.

Finnish legislation has been amended and supplemented to correspond with the Council of Europe's Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. The purpose of the amendments to legislation that have entered into force is to emphasise the condemnation of sexual offenses committed against children and to enforce harsher penalties.

Among other things, legislation related to child sexual abuse and aggravated child sexual abuse has been amended in this respect. The minimum penalty for child sexual abuse was increased to four months imprisonment, while sexual intercourse with a child under 16 years of age is as a rule considered as aggravated child sexual abuse.

A sexual act or acts directed at an under 16-year-old, which are regarded as child sexual abuse, may damage the child's development. Getting a child to engage in sex acts is also considered to be child sexual abuse. An aggravated act is interpreted by law as involving sexual intercourse with an under 16-year-old, when the child subjected to the crime was clearly young or the criminal offense has been going on for a long time. Other criteria include the humiliating nature of the offense and the particular harm that the crime has inflicted on the child due to the special trust in which the perpetrator was held or other position of dependence on the perpetrator. The law considers the crime to be aggravated overall, and the characteristics of the offense fulfilled, even if some of these factors are met.

The enticement of children for sexual purposes, so-called grooming, was included in the Criminal Code this year in the form of a new paragraph and subsections. Concerning the enticement of a child for sexual purposes the paragraph states that the offense takes place when the perpetrator suggests meeting or other such interaction with a child and that the nature or circumstances

The following may constitute distinctive characteristics of child sexual abuse:

- sending of sexually charged messages to a child
- showing a child masturbation of gestures to do with it, for example by webcam
- getting a child to watch sexual intercourse or pornographic material
- asking a child to pose for pornographic pictures
- getting a child to send pictures or videos of him/herself of a sexual nature
- sending a child pictures or videos of one's own genitalia etc
- getting a child to behave in a sexually charged manner, for instance by masturbating, urinating, undressing, putting on underwear or getting a child to wear revealing clothing whereby the perpetrator can watch the child's actions in real time via webcam



of the proposal otherwise indicate that the intent is to make child pornography or subject the child to criminal abuse. This therefore concerns the premeditated nature of the offense. The second sub-section of the paragraph on grooming criminalises the enticement of an under 18-year-old to sell sexual services or perform in a sexually offensive presentation.

Impacts and challenges concerning legislative reform

Some of the attributes of internet-related child sexual abuse could basically be characterised as on the whole constituting less serious offenses than most so-called real life incidents: child sexual abuse may simply constitute sexually loaded writing or sending nude pictures to an under 16-year-old, which is a far more usual method via the internet than in the real world.

However, at its worst internet-related child sexual abuse can make the abuse of the child permanent and never-ending. Graphic material related to sexual offenses that is stored and distributed in public media may in practice be impossible to ever completely remove from the internet. This material, which violates the privacy and dignity of the child gets copied, disseminated and consumed for sexual purposes indefinitely.

The constituent elements of child sexual abuse are fulfilled as soon as there is evidence of a sexual act by an adult against a child. Sexual contact and sexually-charged talk with a child therefore constitute sexual abuse. In prac-

tice it is more challenging to prove the enticement of a child for sexual purposes. In reality the suspicion that an adult is guilty of enticing a child for sexual purposes can be based on the tone or intensity of the discussion that takes place between an adult or child, the adult's efforts to control the child or to instruct the child to keep what they talk about secret or to arrange to meet the child. Other possible actions suggestive of a crime may include the use of false identity by an adult or providing the child with a pre-paid mobile phone connection or phone to use to ensure the privacy of their contacts.

The maximum penalty for enticing a child for sexual purposes is a year's imprisonment. This does not at present enable telemonitoring by the police under the Coercive Measures Act, whereby the maximum penalty for an offense committed must be at least four years imprisonment, or any of the offenses stated in Chapter 5, paragraph 3 of the Coercive Measures Act. In the forthcoming amendment to the Act the possibility for telemonitoring crimes committed on data networks is extended to suspicion of having committed a criminal offense, where the maximum penalty is at least two years imprisonment. Cases that are interpreted as the enticement of children for sexual purposes currently remain outside the scope of telemonitoring jurisdiction, and so many cases may remain unresolved. As a result a perpetrator's possible other crimes against children may remain hidden, because such crimes would only come to light during police investigations to do with impounded computers. The paragraph of the Act relating to the extension of the police's telem-

monitoring powers to include the enticement of children for sexual purposes would improve the possibilities both to prevent and to expose sexual offenses against children.

In terms of the work of the police, a major change is that sexual contact with an under 16-year-old is considered basically as aggravated child sexual abuse. This in turn has an impact on the police information gathering, because in a case of suspected aggravated child sexual abuse the police has the possibility to use telemonitoring and wiretapping.

Averting internet-related sexual offenses

In practice it has been hard to intervene in activities by adults to contact children online for sexual purposes, even when there would be strong suspicion of the perpetrator's intentions to commit criminal abuse against a minor. Establishing criminal liability has only been possible once a sexual offense or an attempted one actually happens.

In Finland, the investigation of sexual offenses is dealt with in police units focusing on lengthy investigations, and in Helsinki by separately designated personnel in the sexual crimes investigation division of the violent crimes unit. In Helsinki in particular good results have been achieved through detective work, whereby a single crime team uncovered a wider series of cases.

The Helsinki Virtual Community Police Team has managed to lower the threshold for reporting in particular concerning internet-related child sexual abuse. In 2010 the team dealt with 10%-20% of sexual offenses and the number of reports of incidents has increased this year.

The activity by the police in detecting such crimes and the lower threshold for reporting them are not sufficient by themselves in intervening in child sexual abuse crimes that remain concealed. There is a need for new modes of action, practices and possibilities to expose and prevent such sexual offenses from happening.

In France, for example, a solution to the problem has been successfully sought using undercover work, in which the police are able to use infiltration and to appear as children on social media. Since 2009 there has been legislation in force in France whereby the perpetrator can be convicted of online sexual offenses against children regardless of whether the victim is in reality underage. In practice the "victim" may be a profile of an under 15-year-old created by the police. This approach has proved useful in detecting internet-related sexual offenses against children. In Finland too a greater scope for the police to conduct undercover work would be an effective way to expose online child sexual abuse.

Conclusion

The development of technology has created new forms of child sexual exploitation. These include going after children on the internet, maintaining an exploitative relationship or pressuring a child into one online, documenting sexual offenses using mobile phones and webcams by photographing children in the abuse context, and disseminating such photographic material online. The problem is multi-dimensional and there is no single solution to it. The issue must be approached from a variety of angles in which all actors have their own role to play.

The presence of parents and their involvement in their children's lives are of crucial importance, both in terms of the internet and real life. Internet use is primarily a positive thing in children's lives and is an important channel for social interaction and gathering information. A negative attitude to the internet on the part of adults who are in close relationships with children and their imposing undue restrictions on internet use easily leads to secrecy and mistrust. This hinders children from resorting to adult support precisely when it is most needed.

Different viewpoints among children and the young or among professionals who work for their benefit play an important role both in terms of preventing sexual offenses against children and intervening in problems, as well as in identifying, helping and supporting children who are subject to abuse. This means that there has to be sufficient information and understanding of the part that digital media plays in child sexual abuse and the related efforts to establish contacts with children. Informing the police about contacts of a sexual nature is an act of responsibility in terms of the child involved and of safeguarding other children.

Further information:

www.poliisi.fi/nettipoliisi

www.pelastakaalapset.fi/nettiturvallisuus





Save the Children Finland engages in internet safety work with the objective of improving children's safety and well-being as well as children's rights in the domain of information and communications technology. This work is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in particular on children's rights relating to the opportunities created by new information technologies and to the specific threats and problems that these involve. SC Finland maintains Nettivihje (hotline) which is a public tipline intended for reporting on illegal content on the Internet. Its aim is to promote detection and deletion of illegal child sexual abuse material on the Internet, and to identify children that are subjected to sexual abuse through national and international co-operation. SC Finland's aim is to increase awareness and understanding of child sexual abuse related to the digital media in order to prevent child sexual abuse, identify the victims and guarantee best possible support and understanding of the specific needs of the victims.

www.pelastakaalapset.fi/nettiturvallisuus

Finnish Virtual Community Policing Group acts physically in Helsinki but its working area covers the whole Finland. Officers aim is to do visible police work with the objectives to prevent crimes, lower the threshold inform police about criminal activity and tackle crime in social media.

www.poliisi.fi/nettipoliisi

