



# CHILDREN'S DISCLOSURES OF ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

## 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 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Africa was not included in this brief due to differences in the survey tool used which prevented comparative analysis.

**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.

## 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

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## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3,4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

2. Mathieu, S. L., Uddin, R., Brady, M., Batchelor, S., Ross, V., Spence, S. H., Watling, D., & Kölves, K. (2021). [Systematic Review: The State of Research Into Youth Helplines](#). *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(10), 1190-1233.

3. Fukkink, R.G., Bruns, S., Ligtvoet, R. (2016). [Voices of Children from Around the Globe: An International Analysis of Children’s Issues at Child Helplines](#). *Children & Society*, 30: 510-519.

4. van Dolen, W., Weinberg, C. B. (2019). [An Empirical Investigation of Factors Affecting Perceived Quality and Well-Being of Children Using an Online Child Helpline](#). *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(12), 2193.

5. Child Helpline International (2021). [Voices during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

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.

**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*<sup>6</sup> 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 Australian eSafety Commissioner’s programme ‘[Start the Chat](#)’ encourages caregivers to talk with their children about their lives online.

**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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