

Digital abuse against children and young people: Systemic challenges and individual consequences

Abstract for oral presentation (20 mins)

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Introduction

Digital abuse against children comprises e.g., non-consensual sharing of content, grooming, sextortion, and online bullying. This presentation sheds light on the lack of a systematic emergency response when children are victims of digital abuse in Denmark and the consequences that may follow. While there is a systematic emergency response for victims of physical abuse in Denmark (to a larger extent than victims of digital abuse), many victims of digital abuse still do not receive the help that is necessary.

Methods

Save the Children Denmark runs a helpline (*SletDet*, eng. *DeleteIt*) for children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse online or other forms of digital assault. The presentation is based on data obtained in the SletDet helpline and qualitative and quantitative analyses made by external agencies.

Results

Children victimized of digital abuse experience different consequences. However, shame, guilt, self-blame, and isolation are common reactions, as well as signs of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. Nevertheless, many victims are not identified or recognized as actual victims of abuse. Some are still faced with a well-intentioned but problematic opinion that “... *at least there was no physical harm*”. Not only may this opinion reflect how poorly the digitalized everyday life of children is understood; it may also explain the barely developed emergency response to digital abuse among children in Denmark.

Conclusion

We call for the development of a systematic emergency response on a local, municipal and national level for children who are victims of digital abuse. For digital abuse to be recognized as severe and victims as worthy of professional help, we need to understand children’s use of digital media and create awareness of the severity of the consequences.