3. symposium: Who do kids turn to when experiencing online abuse

Chair: Dr. Sidsel Harder, University of Ghent
Participants:
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2. Team Protection against Sexual Abuse, Save the Children, Denmark
3. Team Protection against Digital Abuse, Save the Children, Denmark
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Framing

Introduction: The online sphere provides a new social and sexual playground for kids and young people, but also present new threats to minors. Research shows that few kids ask for help from adults, if they experience sexual abuse, e.g. in sextortion or grooming. That means that researchers, NGO's and authorities must think creatively to investigate, help and empower young people in relation to digital vulnerabilities. In this symposium, we present a Danish collaboration between university research, an NGO and law enforcement which aims at finding new ways to access and support peer groups of children in online communities and help them tackle risks of sexual exploitation.

Methods: Funding from the Independent Danish Research Fund allows for international university research to collaborate with the special crime unit's Online Police Patrol and Save the Children. We have teamed up to create a much needed knowledge base regarding sexual abuse against young people within online communities. As data we draw on previous cases from the work of the Danish Online Patrol, links reported to the national child sexual abuse material hotline and advice given on the help line for digital abuse against minors.

Results: The dialogue focuses on digital social practices of kids and young people, and how they can help each other in intervening and reporting attempts at grooming and sextortion within online practices. Gender dynamics, which foster silence and taboos are challenged and active bystander involvement is encouraged.

Conclusion: We argue that the stigmatization of youth's digital social and sexual practices is a barrier for empowerment of peer groups against exploitation. Knowledge about the behavior and meaning of young participants in the online sphere is the foundation for effectively supporting them.

Presentation 1: *Online policing of gaming platforms*

The Online Patrol, Special Crime Unit, Danish Police, police superintendent Sisse Birkebæk

Introduction: Danish Online Police Patrol (DOPP) will present experiences, which illustrates the challenges of grooming of young boys within online gaming forums. Often it is the tips from bystanders, which makes the DOPP aware of the extensive grooming taking place in the gaming community.

Methods: DOPP was established in 2022 to prevent and investigate online crime. DOPP is present on social media and gaming platforms; interacts with children and young people online; and shares advice on safe behavior online. These tools aim to create a familiarity with DOPP which fosters that children and young people may feel encouraged to report suspected online crime.

Results: Gaming platforms enable adult men to contact young boys and guide them onto chat platforms. The approach of the perpetrators is becoming more straightforward and uncritical than previously seen, for example by targeting all boys in the age group 11-15. The victims are offered friendship, gifts and upgrades in the game in exchange for intimate photos or videos. The victims may feel trapped in the relationship, because ending it or not complying with demands may mean that they lose their privileges within the game. They are reluctant to tell their parents – or other adults who are outsiders to gaming - about their experiences, because they know that confiding these issues could result in adults banning the boys from gaming.

Conclusion: In order to police and prevent child sexual abuse online, the first task is for adults is to understand and recognize the huge social significance that gaming has for young boys. Just like the local police officer in an offline youth club establishes confidence through everyday interaction, the DOPP has a familiar and safe – rather than punitive - presence within the online sphere, which enables bystanders to confide in officers.

Presentation 2: *Grooming: From slow and complex to fast and simple*

Team Protection against Sexual Abuse, Save the Children, Denmark, senior consultant Per Frederiksen

Introduction: This presentation discusses recent experiences with online sexual abuse and the development that has taken place in relation to grooming and sextortion over recent years. This includes the meaning of gender specific reactions, particularly with boys.

Methods: Save the Children Denmark (SCD) has fought online abuse for over 20 years through its hotline for CSAM-reporting (AnmeldDet) and its helpline for victims of online abuse and their caregivers (SletDet).

Results: In previous research grooming is seen to be a slow process whereby the perpetrator gains the confidence of the victim with the purpose of exploitation. Recent cases demonstrate changes in that practice: In digital communities, the perpetrator has easy access to victims, and their dependence of him may already be established as part of the online world be it on a social media, in an online game or on an online forum. To understand that dependency, help work must first acknowledge the profound importance of online games and communities in the social lives of young people and recognize that boys are not brought up to guard their sexuality in the same way that girls are. That allows for the perpetrator to "fast-forward" through the grooming and start sextorting victims directly.

Conclusion: The "speed-grooming" process challenges current knowledge about grooming as a complex psychological process. To support young people online, interventions must work with a broad and nuanced understanding of sexual abuse and ongoingly expand knowledge about grooming and sextortion in the online communities. Regulation and law enforcement must be updated and aligned with the solid knowledge that exists about grooming.

Presentation 3: *Why don't victims of online sexual abuse seek help?*

Team Protection against Digital Abuse, Save the Children, Denmark, psychologist Julie Schjørring Larsen

Introduction: Children and young people who experience sexual abuse online are not only facing various and serious consequences. Many refrain from seeking help from others. This presentation will focus on what obstacles children and young people experience as barriers to seek help, and how parents,

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professionals and peers can help tackle those obstacles to better support child victims of digital abuse, such as non-consensual image-sharing.

Methods: Save the children Denmark (SCD) runs a helpline (SletDet) for children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse online or other forms of digital assault. The presentation will be based on knowledge from the helpline and recent Danish studies about children and young people's perspectives on seeking help when experiencing digital assault.

Results: Recent Danish studies show that 1 out of 5 children and young people choose not to tell anyone if they have experienced digital assault. Those, who tell someone, rather tell their friends than their parents. Children and young people describe several reasons not telling anyone about their experiences, e.g., lack of faith in others to be able to help or to understand what has happened, feelings of guilt, feeling that the incident isn't serious enough or fear of the consequences of telling someone. The obstacles differ depending on whether the help would come from a friend, parent or other close adults, teachers, or counselling services.

Conclusions: Many child victims of sexual abuse online or other forms of digital assault need support to tackle the experience. However, before they can get support, adults need to understand the obstacles, which prevent children and young people from seeking help. The effort to make help available should simultaneously seek to make adults more accessible to children, but also equip and empower other children to act as helpers or as steppingstones.

Presentation 4: *Cyberstanders, porn and ethics*

Dr. Sidsel Harder, University of Ghent

Introduction: The classical, sociological approach to the online world sees it as toxic, inhibited and devoid of the moral and ethical community standards, that people live by in their everyday offline world. This digital dualism fails to acknowledge that young people who use the internet for online games and porn also need tools and encouragement in order to act as active "cyberstanders".

Methods: CSAM hotlines are one of the ways in which ordinary internet users by act as bystanders if they find images, which are harmful to children. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis of more than 500 reports to the Danish CSAM hotline and preliminary findings from 20 interviews, my postdoctoral study funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark produces new empirical insights on what triggers internet users to act as active bystanders against child sexual abuse.

Results: Based on age and explicitness, international laws on CSAM sets narrow boundaries for what legally counts as harmful images to children. In their everyday use of online technology and sexual images, internet users show complex and often contradictory understandings of exploitative images. What motivates internet users to act depends on their own social position, on interpretations of context, and of emotional connections with the depicted. Especially feelings of shame over e.g. porn watching can work both as a barrier to reporting but also encourage self-reflectivity and a strong need to act to help others.

Conclusion: To nurture the translation of feelings of empathy into bystander interventions, CSAM hotlines have a crucial role in communicating that as an internet user, it is possible – and easy - to make an important positive difference in the lives of other people. Based on empirical research rather than moralistic politics, empowering message could be mainstreamed within sex education and public debate.

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