ONLINE GROOMING

A growing threat to children in the digital age

CHILD10

INTRODUCTION OF AUTHORS

The following recommendations are suggested by the organizations Agir Contre la Prostitution des Enfants (ACPE) from France, Child10 from Sweden, Child Focus from Belgium, Netzwerk gegen Menschenhandel from Germany and Protect Children from Finland. The recommendations are based on a joint report which detects and highlights the problem of grooming in the respective countries.

BACKGROUND

Grooming refers to a scenario where an adult "builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person in order to manipulate, exploit and abuse them. Online grooming is when this process is facilitated, partly or entirely, by the internet or other wireless communications".[1] The recommendations in this summary are based on the report *Online grooming - a growing threat to children in the digital age* which examines grooming in the respective countries of the organizations that produced the report.

Grooming is not a new phenomenon. However, with the rise of technology, we see that online grooming is growing rapidly and is becoming a widespread problem. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this issue with a significant increase in the number of websites hosting self-generated child sexual abuse material and reports of online enticements.

The report highlights that children across Western Europe have high internet saturation and social media usage with girls spending more time on social media platforms than boys. As children get older, they use social media for social contact with friends or family, using video calls, voice messages and emails regularly. While children under six usually don't own a smartphone, they often have access to their parents' devices, which may or may not be supervised. The most commonly used social media platforms vary across countries, but Youtube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Snapchat are popular among children and youth. The rise in gaming has also raised concerns about the safety of children on gaming platforms, as perpetrators are using these platforms for grooming children.

All countries in this report have a definition of grooming and child sexual abuse and a legal framework in place to address these crimes, but they differ in how they define the terms. Although progress has been made when it comes to the issue of grooming, there are still gaps in legislation, prevention education and technology company efforts to detect and prevent grooming. The following recommendations highlight what we believe to be necessary measures to take to tackle the issue of grooming.

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[1] National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). (n.d). Grooming. Available: *https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/grooming/*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings from our joint report. They represent three areas in which we see the possibility for great improvements to be able to work towards an online environment free from technology-facilitated grooming.

Data and Research

Firstly, there is an urgent need for research and data gathering on technology-facilitated grooming. We found that specific social media platforms are often left unnamed in news reports, and reliable statistics disaggregated by platforms are not available in the countries. The report is intended to shed light on the ways that social media is being used to exploit and groom children, and what immediate and long-term steps that need to be taken to protect children in the above-mentioned countries and beyond. Therefore we suggest the following recommendations on data and research to better understand the width of the problem:

- **Countries should encourage research activities.** There is a data gap in knowledge on technology-facilitated grooming that needs to be addressed. Up-to-date information on how, where and how often the crimes are committed would facilitate elaboration of evidence- and research-based solutions to protect children and prevent crimes from happening.
- **Data on technology-facilitated crimes of grooming should be available to organizations, professionals and the general public.** Open-access data would raise awareness on prevalence and patterns of crimes of technology-facilitated grooming and contribute to the formulation of responses.
- **Reporting needs to be platform-specific.** Platforms used by the offender to contact children and commit the crime need to be disclosed. This would determine which platforms are in use, how often and why, as well as provide a basis for efficient collaboration with the platforms to co-create solutions.

Education and Prevention

Secondly, in recent decades, several countries have been shaken by the upsurge in the number of cases of child sexual abuse, particularly, where the internet has been used. As online environments, such as social media, become more and more integrated with children's lives at an early age, we see the need for education both for children, teachers and parents in the following areas:

- **Countries should require repeated, age-appropriate education** on digital safety skills as part of the national school curriculum beginning in primary school.
- **The digital safety skills curricula should introduce modules to sex education classes that include the online environment,** explain sexting, sextortion, grooming and behavior patterns used by perpetrators as well as what to do in case one suspects they or someone they know might be groomed. At the same time, the curricula should address victim-blaming and ensure children understand that abuse is never their fault, and they have nothing to be ashamed about, to encourage more children to disclose grooming and abuse

- **The curricula should further educate children on how to react if their peers disclose abuse to them.** Evidence shows that children are more likely to disclose online grooming and abuse to another child instead of an adult, therefore, children should be provided with ways to handle such information and given guidance on low-threshold ways to involve trusted adults or professionals who can help.
- **Pedagogical professionals should receive training on spotting red flags** indicating grooming and other online risks as well as how to create safe spaces for children to discuss these risks.
- **Parents should receive prevention education to teach them about the online risks their children face.** Parents should be encouraged to be present and aware of their children's activities online, learn how to create a positive environment of trust conducive to discussion of grooming and other online risks. This should further include guidelines to develop an overall environment of trust, openness and mutual respect between the parents and children to encourage children to disclose to their parents if they face abuse or find themselves in a dangerous situation.
- **Raise general public awareness about the prevalence and scale of online sexual violence against children on social media.** Due to the reach and ease of the internet and social media, anyone can be a victim, and anyone can be a perpetrator. Misconceptions, both about who can be a victim and who is likely to be a perpetrator are dangerous and often invoke a false sense of security in the public. It is, therefore, important to challenge such misconceptions to fully understand the risks.

Legislation and Cooperation

Lastly, even though the report identifies that legislations are present in each of the observed countries, the report identifies that cooperation regarding EU legislations are lacking. Additionally, we need to see more cooperation between different sectors which together have the possibility to prevent technology-facilitated grooming together. Therefore we urge for the following:

- **Comprehensive EU-wide legislation** needs to address the challenges of the development of technology whilst simultaneously respecting the rights of the child. Legislation needs to be sustainable and must therefore take into consideration the constantly developing nature of technology.
- **Social media companies should be obliged to cooperate** with child protection efforts. Reporting cases and suspicion of crimes against children should be mandated by law. Safeguards should be implemented in EU legislation, including mandating that social media companies utilize CSAM detection tools and age-verification measures on their platforms.
- **The proposed EU Regulation 2022/0155 needs to be accepted** and implemented into States Parties' national legislations to ensure effective detection and reporting of CSAM.
- **Social media company flaggers, educators, law enforcement, social workers, youth authorities and CSOs working on the ground should collaborate on training** to work together on identifying what they are seeing to find solutions together.

Read the full version of the report here.

AUTHORS OF THE REPORT

Child10 has since the start 2014 been presenting an award to ten different organizations yearly. The award is given to organizations that have shown a strong dedication to the cause of protecting children from trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. Over the years, the Child10 Award has acknowledged a diverse range of organizations, all of whom have made significant contributions in this field. In collaboration with four of the Awarded Members of 2022, this report has been written to shed light on the important work being done by these organizations in the fight against online grooming.

Protect Children is a non-profit, non-governmental organization with a mission to prevent all forms of sexual violence against children through a research-based, holistic approach. This involves working with a range of stakeholders, including professionals, governments, NGOs, offenders, families, victims, and survivors, to create sustainable solutions that address the root causes of sexual violence.

Netzwerk gegen Menschenhandel, has a comprehensive approach which involves a range of initiatives such as workshops, training, educational materials and programs in schools, all aimed at preventing exploitation and cyber-grooming.

Agir Contre la Prostitution des Enfants (ACPE), has a primary goal which is to raise awareness and educate institutions and the public about commercial sexual exploitation of children. ACPE also supports affected young people, families, and professionals and participates in trials against perpetrators.
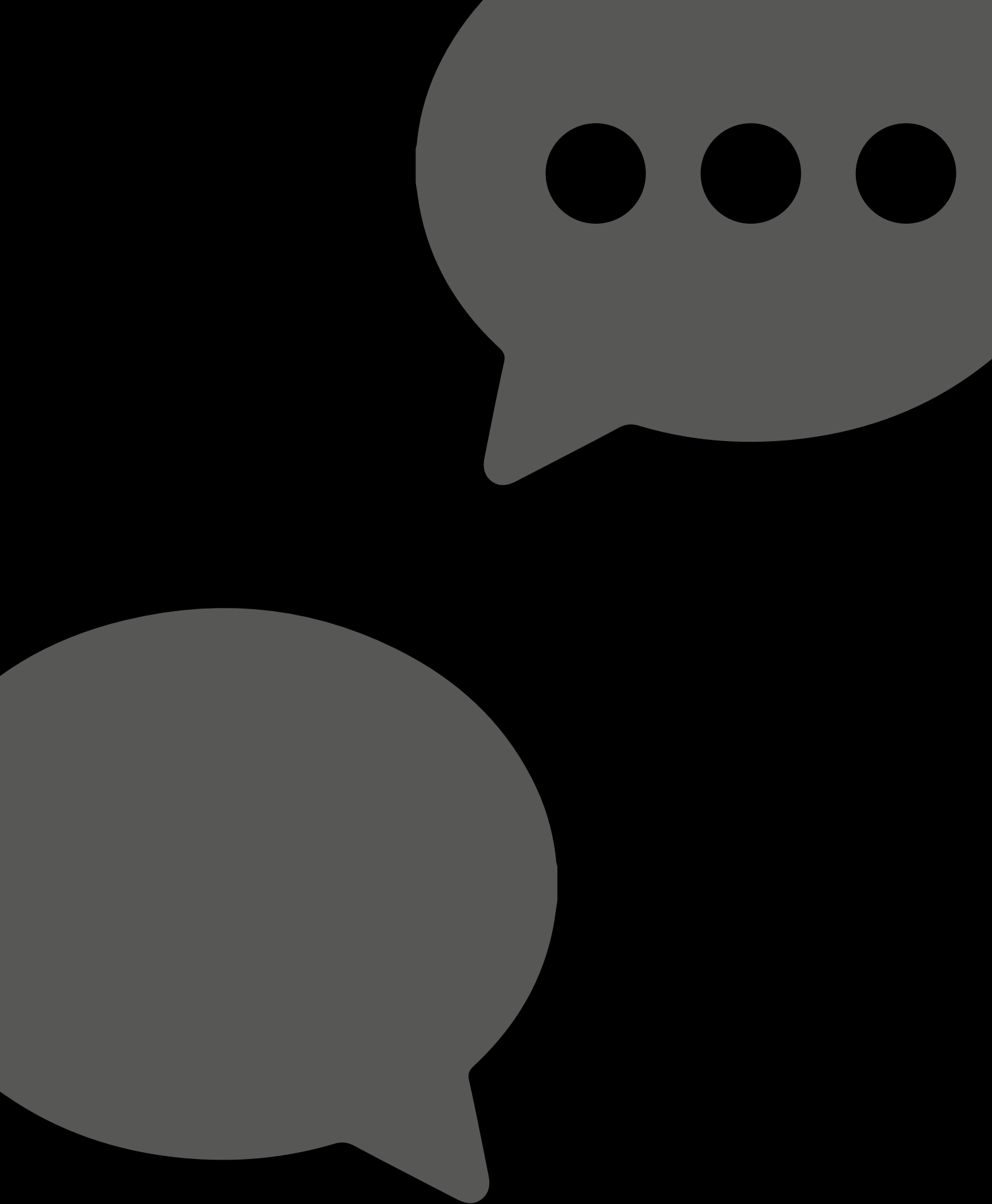
Child Focus has undertaken various initiatives including support helplines, prevention programs, advocacy, and lobbying in their fight for the rights of missing and sexually exploited children.

Child10 works through a holistic approach that focuses on prevention, protection, and prosecution. Their mission is to work with grassroots organizations and leading experts to develop and advocate for powerful and durable solutions that can help end child trafficking and sexual exploitation.

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