

FINLAND  
SNAPSHOT

# PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ONLINE GROOMING

Cross-cultural, qualitative and  
child-centred data to guide  
grooming prevention and response

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# INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the pandemic, incidents of online grooming (Thorn, 2022; Finkelhor et al., 2024) and child sexual and financial exploitation are at an all-time high (Thorn, 2022). While the number of children who have access to an online device continues to increase around the world, so does their risk of being harmed (Marwick et al., 2024).

While online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) occurs at scale, across diverse settings and contexts, research exploring the issue generally involves participants from single geographic or cultural contexts. Moreover, existing research tends to focus on victim-perpetrator interactions, with the result that, internationally, there is little evidence to show how children – in all of their diversity – make decisions about who to engage with and why, as they navigate fast-paced, often socially-oriented, digital platforms and services.

With funding from the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund, in 2023-24, Save the Children Hong Kong partnered with the Young and Resilient Research Centre (Y&R) at Western Sydney University and six Save the Children offices, primarily in the global South, to explore how children from diverse backgrounds experience the various pleasures and pressures of engaging with unknown others online, and what steps they take to protect themselves from potential harm.

This report presents analysis of data generated with children aged 9-12 in Finland, as part of the broader study with children from Australia, Cambodia, Colombia, Finland, Philippines, Kenya and South Africa.



The study addressed the following key questions:

- » How do children in different contexts judge whether it is safe or unsafe to connect with an unknown other?
- » What tools and strategies do they use to keep themselves safe?
- » To what extent do gender, age, and culture affect children's online engagements with unknown others?
- » What might prompt children to report unwanted contact from unknown others online?
- » What do children need from governments, technology platforms, NGOs, educators and parents to enable them to prevent or respond effectively to incidents of online grooming?

By listening carefully to children, the study aimed to identify how governments, technology platforms, services, educators, and parents in each country might channel children's insights into the design of more effective policies, programming, product features, and systemic change to better support children to prevent, respond to, and report OCSEA. We hope that the data contained herein can productively inform policy and practice targeting children's online safety in Finland.



# METHODS

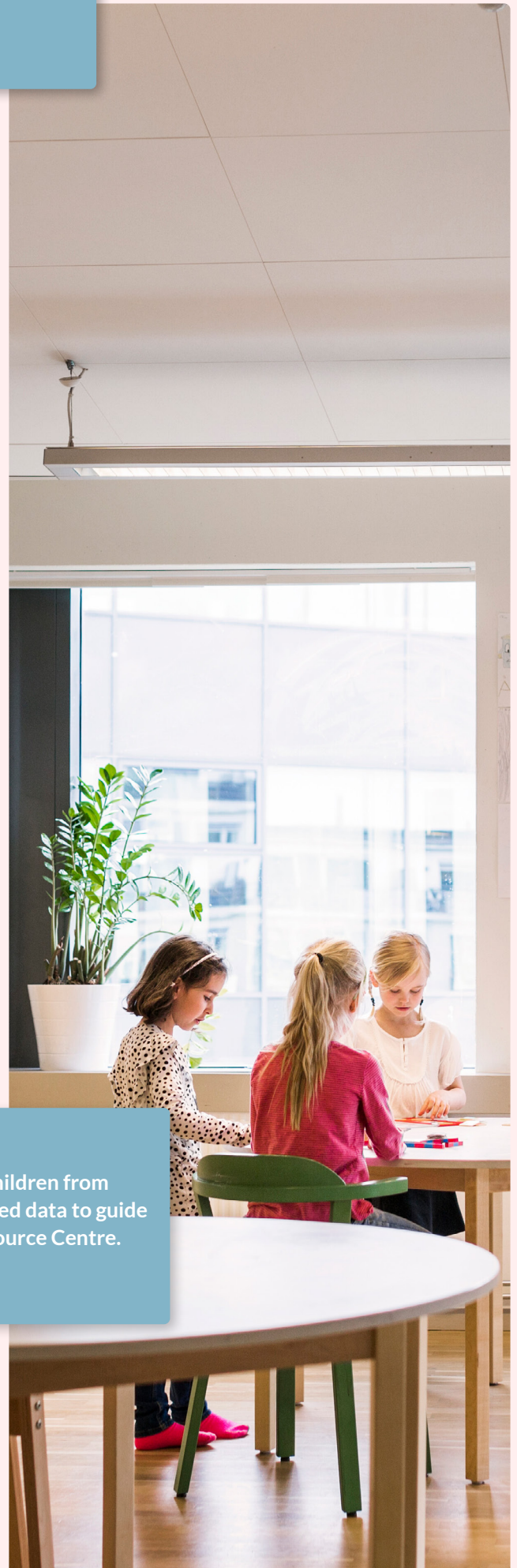
To maximise cross-cultural understanding of children's experiences online, creative and participatory workshops were conducted with children in multiple locations in each country. The study deployed Y&R's innovative Distributed Data Generation (DDG) methodology. DDG equips trusted partners in multiple international locations to work collaboratively with researchers to adapt methods to be culturally relevant, to engage with young participants to generate primarily qualitative data concurrently across multiple countries and contexts, and to facilitate collaborative development and presentation of analyses <sup>1</sup>.

Young participants in each country took part in a five-hour, face-to-face workshop completing a series of structured activities, either individually or in small groups. Multiple workshops were held in each country, typically with around 20 young people taking part in each workshop. Save the Children Offices led data collection in all countries except Australia, where workshops were facilitated by Y&R. In October 2023, two Finnish workshops were conducted with 37 children (19 male and 18 female) aged between 9-12 years recruited from grades 4 and 6 in a language immersion school in Finland.



For more information on the methodology, see [Protecting Children from Online Grooming: Cross-cultural, qualitative and child-centred data to guide grooming prevention and response](#) | Save the Children's Resource Centre.

<sup>1</sup>For further information about DDG, see: Third, A., Lala, G., Moody, L., & Theakstone, G. (2021). Children's Views on Digital Health in the Global South: Perspectives from cross-national, creative and participatory workshops. In *Creative Approaches to Health Education* (pp. 173-189). Routledge



## A snapshot of Finnish participants' technology use

We asked young participants how and when they went online. 68% of Finnish children access the internet multiple times a day, and 95% do so on a personal device such as a smartphone, or tablet.

**Table 1. Devices used by children**

Please note: Total % does not equal 100 as participants could choose more than one option.

Device	%
My own smartphone or tablet	95% (n=35)
My own computer or laptop	30% (n=11)
My own gaming console or device	41% (n=15)
A shared gaming console or device at home	27% (n=10)
A school device like a computer or tablet	57% (n=21)
A shared smartphone or tablet at home	22% (n=8)
A shared computer or laptop at home	19% (n=7)
A public device like at a library	0
Television	46% (n=17)

**Table 2. Frequency of device usage**

Frequency of usage	%
Multiple times a day	68% (n=25)
Once every day	8% (n=3)
A couple of times a week	5% (n=2)
About once a week	3% (n=1)
Don't know/prefer not to say/unanswered	16% (n=6)



Figure 1. Online platforms used

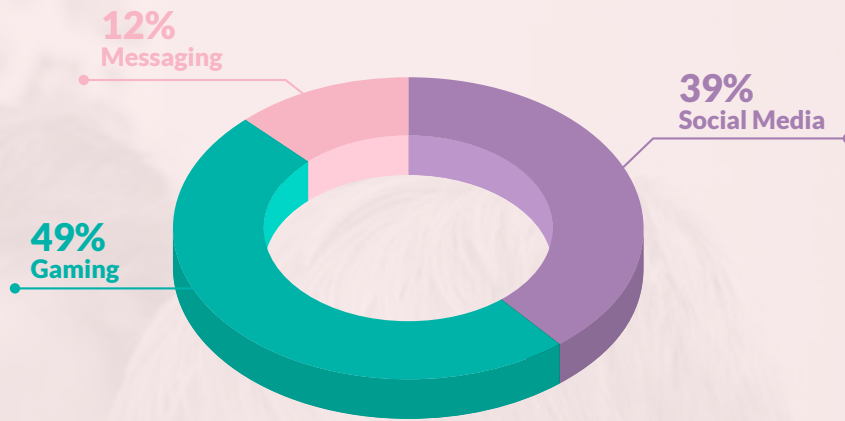


Figure 2. Social media platforms used



Our young Finnish participants have ready access to online technologies, with nearly all using their own devices to go online. Use of shared devices is also relatively common, specifically in public spaces like school. A notable percentage also access a shared device at home (although, in contrast to some other countries like Kenya, none of our young participants reported using shared devices in common spaces like libraries). Young Finnish children generally go online regularly, with more than two-thirds of our participants going online more than once every day.

Unlike in other countries, Finnish participants encounter unknown others mostly on gaming platforms. It is important to note that all Finnish participants were in the lower age group of 9-12 years which may significantly skew the findings. For example, the younger age of Finnish participants could explain why they reported a relatively higher gaming percentage than any other country. As in other countries though, when they are online using social media is by far the next most common activity. Their social media use encompasses a range of platforms, such as Whatsapp, Snapchat, Instagram and Fortnite. These overall patterns of access and use broadly align with that of most other countries in the wider project and also reflect typical understandings of how children and young people use digital and online technologies.





# KEY FINDINGS

# 1 Children routinely encounter unknown others in the spaces they congregate to socialise online.

Children across countries in the study primarily interact online with those they know in their face-to-face settings. For children in Finland, face-to-face interaction is a key factor in their friendships. Finnish children consider a friend as someone they interacted with in-person on a regular basis.



*“You know someone is your friend if you’ve seen them and spent a lot of time with them.”*

**Male, 11, Urban, Finland**

*“For me, a friend is a person I’m regularly in touch with. I know someone is my friend if they value me and want to be with me.”*

**Female, 12, Urban, Finland**

*“A friend is a person you know. You’ve talked to a friend and gotten along with them.”*

**Female, 12, Urban, Finland**



Though this study found that children across countries routinely encounter unknown others in online spaces where they congregate to socialise with peers, Finnish children were the exception. Perhaps due to the young age of participants in Finland (age 9-12), many said they never encounter unknown others online, and were limited in their exposure to unknown others as they were not allowed on social media due to their age. Finnish children were most likely to meet unknown others online while gaming.



## 2 Children regard all those online connections they have not met face-to-face with a degree of suspicion.

Children across participating countries interact with three kinds of others online: a) **Genuine Friends**: those people they know face-to-face, including casual acquaintances; b) **Known Unknowns**: those they know of through their friends' and families' face-to-face and/or online social networks; and c) **Unknown Unknowns**: those they meet exclusively through online interactions.

In general, Finnish children only fully trust Genuine Friends and regard all others with suspicion.



*"I think there are differences, because for example, there are reliable friends at school but not online."*

Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland

*"An online friend isn't as trustworthy."*

Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland

*"Internet friends can scam and groom you, because he/she can lie and it's easier as you are not physically with the person. Physical friends i.e. those who do things with you are better."*

Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland



Across the study, children tend to treat online connections they do not know face-to-face – both Known Unknowns and Unknown Unknowns – with a degree of suspicion: 86% say they approach unknown others online with caution.



Children across countries were most prudent when engaging with people with whom they have no prior knowledge or connection – that is complete strangers or unknown unknowns. Participants said they rely on being able to observe the physical attributes, body language, and tone of speech to evaluate the identities and intentions of unknown others. Interacting through a screen limits their ability to assess the safety of an unknown unknown, making it difficult to judge their character.



*"You don't know the character of the online strangers but you can see the character of the offline strangers."*

Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland

*"A stranger on the internet could be anyone. They can also claim to be someone else. If you see a stranger on the street you can see their facial features and he/she can't claim whatever."*

Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland

*"You don't know what kind of person the online stranger is."*

Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland





### 3 Children are motivated to interact with unknown others by a strong desire for friendship, and to expand their networks and opportunities.

As they mature and become more social, children are more inclined to connect with unknown others online. Children across countries are motivated to connect with unknown others primarily by a genuine desire for friendship, fun and play, followed by a desire to stay informed about trends and events, to connect over shared interests, to gain followers and to expand their network.

As with most of the participants in this study, friendship is the primary motivation for Finnish children when they interact with unknown others online.



*"[Children accept friend requests from unknown others] because they think they'll get more friends."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[Children accept friend requests from unknown others] if they want more friends or want to get to know new people."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[Children] are interested in the person or they accept them because they want to talk to someone."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



Some children noted that it is considerably easier to interact with strangers online than in face-to-face settings.



*"It's easier to contact people on the internet and you don't need to be as brave to talk online."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



# 4 Children weigh up the risks of harm and the potential benefits when assessing whether to interact with unknown others online.

Children generally know that engaging with unknown others online can be risky. They are concerned unknown others might expose them to online bullying; physical harm; inappropriate requests for personal information; data and privacy risks; inappropriate sexually-orientated exchanges; or criminal activities.

Finnish participants express concern that younger children are particularly vulnerable to these online harms.



*"Some younger children might not understand what's going on."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"They want to play with them and don't realise something bad could come out of it."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"They don't know the person behind the message [so they] could be anyone."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**



Although they acknowledge the risks of harm associated with interacting with unknown others online, children report that this knowledge does not necessarily deter them from pursuing relationships with unknown others online. Some children reported that they are inclined to give unknown others the benefit of the doubt. They take calculated risks in pursuit of meaningful relationships.



*"I won't be able to know [an unknown other] is for real unless I give him a chance."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



Reflecting the routine nature of encountering unknown others in online spaces, approximately one quarter (27%) of children in the study – primarily those in high-income countries such as Finland – reported that they are rarely troubled by requests to connect and other contact from unknown others.



*"I feel quite normal [about this friend request]. I've had friend requests before."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"I accept because why not?"*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[It's] nothing special, it's just a friend request."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



# 5 Children use relational verification and targeted investigation strategies when interacting with unknown others online.

Across countries, children's decision-making about interacting with unknown others is shaped by intuition, relational verification and targeted investigation.

Children overwhelmingly report that their decisions about connecting with unknown others online are guided by intuition or their 'gut feeling'. Children in Finland rely on their intuition – whether this be positive, neutral or negative to guide their decision-making when they receive a friend request or message from an unknown person online.



*"[I reject the friend request because it is] weird and distressing... Because I don't know this person."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[I accept because] I feel excited [and] I feel happy."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"I rejected [an invitation from an unknown other] because the message was suspicious."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**



Children also rely on **relational verification** which involves scrutinising and evaluating whether unknown others have existing face-to-face or online connections with other trusted connections to ascertain the extent to which an unknown other might be trustworthy. Having mutual friends could mean that children were more comfortable accepting a friend request from an unknown other. Finnish children, like most participants in this study, appeared to place a high level of trust in their friendship networks.



*"The person is not just anybody but my friend's cousin."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[I accept the request] [b]ecause my friend knows him."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"I first check if some of my friends follows her if [someone] does, I'll accept, if not, I'll reject."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



Despite this, children were more likely to accept a friend request from someone they had physically seen or met in real life.



*"I rejected the invitation because one shouldn't trust a person one has never seen before."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"Don't accept if you don't know the person."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**



Children's **targeted investigation** practices include conducting background checks, asking questions, or requesting proof of identity to determine if it is safe to engage with an unknown other online.



*"[I] ask what's his/her age."*

**Female, 10, Urban, Finland**

*"You should ask the person for their information."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"Check [their] profile first."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**





## 6 Children observe new online connections over time to determine their authenticity and to monitor whether they are trustworthy.

When children encounter or add someone – known or otherwise – to their friendship networks online, they do not automatically assume that new connection merits their ongoing trust. Rather, they tend to carefully monitor new contacts' self-representation and behaviours over time, watching for consistency.

Children identified a range of observable signs or red flags – that they use to evaluate whether a new connection's intentions are appropriate and warrant their trust. Red flags include comments on their body or appearance; questions about where they live, go to school, or work; requests for personal information, such as date of birth or identity documents; and questions about their personal life, such as their relationship status. Finnish participants were particularly wary about questions that are personal or private.



*"[A red flag is when they ask] how old am I."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] have you dated anyone?"*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] for your car registration number."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] for your debit card PIN code..."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[It's a red flag when they ask] can you give me your photo?"*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**



Children across countries indicate that their friendship networks are not fixed but fluid and changing. Children are constantly monitoring their 'gut feeling' as their connections with unknown others unfold over time. Many construct unknown others as friends on a probation period.



*"I accepted the invitation because my friend knows him, but if he starts sending me weird messages I will delete him."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"Don't accept because you don't know her but if you do accept her, remove her if she acts weird and tell your parents."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



# 7 Children prioritise protective strategies that are easy to implement inside the flow of their fast-paced digital media engagement.

As with children across countries, Finnish children protect themselves from potentially harmful interactions with unknown others using a combination of preventative and responsive strategies.

Children's **preventive strategies** include restricting the personal information they share with unknown others, not accepting connection requests from unknown others, and always being vigilant and careful.



*"[Do not] send a message [to] or call a stranger except if you both know each other."*

**Female, 10, Urban, Finland**

*"I rejected [an unknown person's] friend request because I don't know her."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"I won't tell him anything. I'll say that we don't know each other well enough for me to be comfortable sharing these things."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



Children's **responsive strategies** include ignoring and rejecting requests; blocking, reporting and seeking help from a trusted adult; responding to unknown others by asking them to stop; asking questions; changing topic; and ultimately disconnecting from the platform or device.



*"I would block [an unwanted contact]."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[I would say:] Could you leave me alone please and stop sending me messages?"*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"Remove the apps so that this wouldn't happen."*

**Female, 10, Urban, Finland**

*"Ask [an unwanted contact] why he's asking [such questions] and not give him any answers."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**



Interestingly, children in Finland were the only participants to suggest that it is important to collect evidence of inappropriate exchanges online, in the event that the situation escalates. This indicates that Finnish participants had a high level of online safety literacy.



*"Take a screen [shot] of all the chats and send them to the police."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



## 8 Children experience significant barriers to reporting online grooming incidents.

Children from all participating countries believe that formal reporting mechanisms are a key to a robust online safety ecology. While many children in participating countries show a reluctance to report through formal channels, Finnish children were the most likely participants to report an online incident directly to the police. Finnish participants consistently referred to parents and police as trusted sources of help and support in this study.



*"[Report] to parents and authorities because they can be trusted."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"File a police report."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[Report to] the police [and to] the parents because they would have been able to help."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[When something happens online] I'll call the police."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



Perhaps because they were younger (age 9-12) than other children in the study, some Finnish participants say they would ask for help from their parents to report incidents to the police. Finnish children's reliance on parents to support their reporting of online safety breaches is in keeping with the finding in the broader study that older children find it significantly easier to report to authorities than younger children.



*"[When something happens tell your] parents so that they could file a police report."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**





# 9 Children regard their online safety as a responsibility shared by government, NGOs, technology platforms and their broader communities.

Children assert that their online safety is a whole-of-community responsibility, highlighting the important role of parents and caregivers, governments, technology companies, and schools to keep them and their peers safe online.



*"Parents should teach children about dangers of Internet and children should inform to authorities or parents when someone does something. Decision makers should tell others about those dangers."*

**Male, 12, Urban, Finland**

*"[Decision-makers should ensure] safety for children. [They should] give advice how to act."*

**Female, 12, Urban, Finland**



Children say, above all else, they need parents and other family members to supervise their digital practices, and to establish and enforce clear and rigorous rules to protect them online. Indeed, children in Finland say that parents and caregivers have a duty to monitor and supervise their child's online interactions.



*"[Parents] should check what their child is doing online."*

**Male, 10, Urban, Finland**

*"[They] should know when children and young people are in contact [with] strangers on [the] internet and on social media."*

**Male, 12, Urban, Finland**



Children urge governments to work with and direct industry to provide protections against harmful users; to provide accessible mechanisms to respond and report potentially harmful experiences; and to ensure that their digital participation is age-appropriate for example, by designing and enforcing rules that mandate age restrictions for social media use, regulating online content, or limiting access to devices by age.



*"[Governments should] protect [children] from all scary and distressing [content]. [They] could [protect] you from all stupid things."*

**Male, 11, Urban, Finland**

*"[Politicians should] make the Internet [platforms] safer!"*

**Female, 10, Urban, Finland**



More so than in other countries, children in Finland call for legal systems to be strengthened to facilitate justice for those who experience online grooming.



*"[Police should] imprison paedophiles."*

**Male, 12, Urban, Finland**

*"Make sure that the person being talked to on Internet is not [dangerous] and if child is being blackmailed, that person is put to jail."*

**Male, 12, Urban, Finland**





Children believe technology companies are responsible for monitoring and removing inappropriate content on their platforms. Consistent with the broader findings, Finnish children generally felt that technology companies were not taking an active enough role in minimising exposure to harmful interactions with unknown others online. In particular, they emphasise the need for technology companies to provide in-app safety education; to mandate platforms' proactive monitoring and removal of harmful accounts and communications; and stronger regulation of younger users' access to social media platforms.



*"When one downloads e.g. Whatsapp, there could be video, which would tell how to use WhatsApp safely."*

**Female, 10, Urban, Finland**

*"If the conversation sounds suspicious, the app would warn the person whom the suspicious messages are being sent [from]."*

**Male, 9, Urban, Finland**

*"[On] social media, there should be supervision [of] everything."*

**Male, 12, Urban, Finland**

*"In my opinion there should be tighter rules [on] social media [so] that all children would be safe [on] social media. I also hope that there would be, [for] example some kind of locking [of the interactions of] under 18 year-old children [so] that strangers couldn't send messages, but only friends could."*

**Female, 12, Urban, Finland**



# 10 Children want clear avenues for guidance and support to strengthen their online interactions.

Where children go to for help and advice about online safety is heavily dependent on who they trust – and therefore differs according to geographic, cultural, political, and social context. Children from high-income countries such as Finland are more likely to seek help from formal structures of support, such as services, helplines and police or other authorities, while those in middle-income countries are more likely to seek out community structures of support, such as community leaders, community elders, and community organisations.



*"Parents or child protective services [could help children be safe in their interactions with unknown others online]."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[She can seek help from] her parents or the authorities because they can be trusted."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**

*"[Children can seek help from] parents, [other] safe adults and authorities."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



Like other countries, the most common source of help identified by Finnish children was a parent or caregiver. Parents and caregivers are viewed as a trustworthy and reliable source of support that can give meaningful advice about dealing with online safety issues, such as inappropriate interactions with unknown others.



*"He talked to [his] mum because [she] is safe and trustworthy."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[He talked to] his own parent because they are safe and reliable adults."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**



Finnish children generally felt comfortable about turning to the police or authorities when encountering an online issue.



*"[She should] block and tell the police."*

**Small group, 11-12, Urban, Finland**





# 11 Children want to turn to parents and caregivers for support, but feel they are underequipped to guide their children.

Children believe that skilling parents and caregivers needs to be a key focus for future online safety efforts. While the broader study found that, in children's experience, parents and caregivers do not always understand the dangers children face online and/or lack knowledge and confidence about how best to support, guide, or respond to potential risks and harms. Perhaps due to their younger age (age 9-12), Finnish children did not express these same concerns about the limitations of their parents' capacities to support them when they encounter difficulties online. Children in Finland generally felt comfortable approaching their parents and caregivers for support and were confident in their trusted adult's ability to help them with their online safety issues.



*"He talked to mum because mum is safe and trustworthy."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**

*"[He should talk] to his mom for example, because his mom could talk to him about things he can say no to. And parents support you."*

**Small group, 9-11, Urban, Finland**



It would be valuable to conduct further research with older Finnish children to understand whether they have similar perceptions about the gaps in the knowledge of adult caregivers to children in the broader study.



# 12 Children are calling for widespread, accessible and targeted education about safe interaction with unknown others online.

Across countries, children highlight an urgent need for online safety education to be accessible to every child across the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, regardless of where they live.



*"Give safety to children. Give advice how to act."*

Female, 12, Urban, Finland



Children across countries, including in Finland, ask for specific and targeted education that teaches them how to identify risk, what information is safe to share, where they can go when they need help, how to respond to unknown others, and how to report inappropriate behaviour online.



Children want educational initiatives to take place in accessible and familiar contexts, within schools and communities, as well as online platforms, apps and games. They call for platform- and site-based education to leverage popular digital formats, such as video, to deliver online safety information.



*"When one downloads [a messaging app], there could be a video, which would tell how to use [it] safely."*

Female, 10, Urban, Finland





# 13 Children believe technical innovations can profoundly improve their online safety.

Children in Finland were keenly aware of the potential for technologies to be leveraged to strengthen their online safety. Participants identified a range of specific features or functions they want technology companies to employ to help keep children safe online. Across all countries, children ask companies to use algorithms to improve the discovery of online safety information, education and tools; implement automatic blocking and banning; increase security of personal information; provide in-app education; and to ensure interactions are age-appropriate.

Finnish participants ask technology companies to make their online platforms safer by implementing age limit, warning systems, monitoring and automatic blocking and banning.



*“Make age limits, [so] that an older person cannot talk to younger people.”*

**Female, 12, Urban, Finland**

*“If the conversation sounds suspicious, the app would warn the person whom to suspicious messages are being sent to.”*

**Male, 9, Urban, Finland**

*“You should know that some [children] face strange people online and don’t always tell... adults. [People] who ask personal questions should be removed from applications. With reporting there could be a permission for someone trustworthy to see messages between them.”*

**Female, 12, Urban, Finland**





# CONCLUSION

Interacting with unknown others is a routine part of many children's daily experience online. Indeed, meeting and engaging with strangers online can be rewarding, enriching, helpful, and fun for children. At the very least, such interactions may be relatively transitory and harmless. On the other hand, real and serious risks of harm can and do arise if children engage with unknown others online without thought for their safety. Our research shows that when children encounter an unknown person online, they employ a complex process of decision making to determine whether it is safe or unsafe to interact.

Although children in all countries are acutely aware of the potential to be deceived or harmed by people they do not know online, they also recognise the potential benefits of making connections with unknown others. The capacity of digital platforms to foster human connection is one of the great triumphs of technology, and children around the world celebrate and enjoy this feature of the digital environment. Accordingly, rather than attempting to shield them from all potential harm by eliminating their ability to forge connections online, children ask for appropriate intervention from parents, governments, technology companies and schools, to facilitate their safe connection with others online.

Achieving the right balance between creating tools and processes to support children's safety, which are relatable, practical and effective is becoming increasingly critical. As the online spaces in which children socialise expand and transform, so too, incidences of online childhood sexual exploitation and abuse continue to rise across the globe. There is thus an urgent need to strengthen the safety of the digital spaces in which children interact with unknown others; to enhance the efficacy of educational and behaviour change initiatives across generations; and to ensure that legal systems are fit for purpose and can deliver justice in a timely manner.

Children in this study have been clear in their desire for familial, community, institutional and private sector support to ensure their online interactions are age-appropriate and constructive. Children are calling on governments and technology companies to take seriously both the challenges and opportunities the online world offers them. Children want to be safe from online threats and harms and, as the children in this study declare, it is a whole of community duty to keep them safe online. However, for far too long, the conversation has focused only on protecting children from harm. To genuinely reflect the contributions of children and young people in this study, it is time to turn attention to not just keeping children safe online but ensuring their online experiences are optimal.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Support children and young people to manage their relationships with friends and a range of unknown others online, including those with whom they have a mutual connection and those who are completely unknown to them. Build upon and reinforce children and young people's instincts to treat those they don't know with suspicion and protect themselves from harm.

2

Encourage children and young people – and the adults who support them – to block and report bad actors online, and make it easy to do so.

3

Strengthen and increase the accessibility of comprehensive online safety and digital literacy education for children and young people to support their management of interactions with unknown others.

4

Strengthen education for parents, carers, teachers and community leaders to equip them to better communicate with and support their children to interact safely with unknown others.

5

Strengthen and enforce legislation and mechanisms of redress/justice for children and young people who experience online harms.

6

Consider developing an industry standard around online privacy and security by default for children and young people to minimise the possibility that they inadvertently share personal information with bad actors in ways that may compromise them.

7

Reduce the likelihood that children and young people will unwittingly interact with adults and those who might be bad actors in online spaces while ensuring that children and young people can engage in age-appropriate interactions.

8

Reduce the likelihood that children and young people will encounter violent, sexually explicit, or other age-inappropriate online content to encourage positive norm-setting online.

9

Consider implementing AI-powered warning systems to alert young users about the characteristics and prior practices of unknown others with whom they interact online.

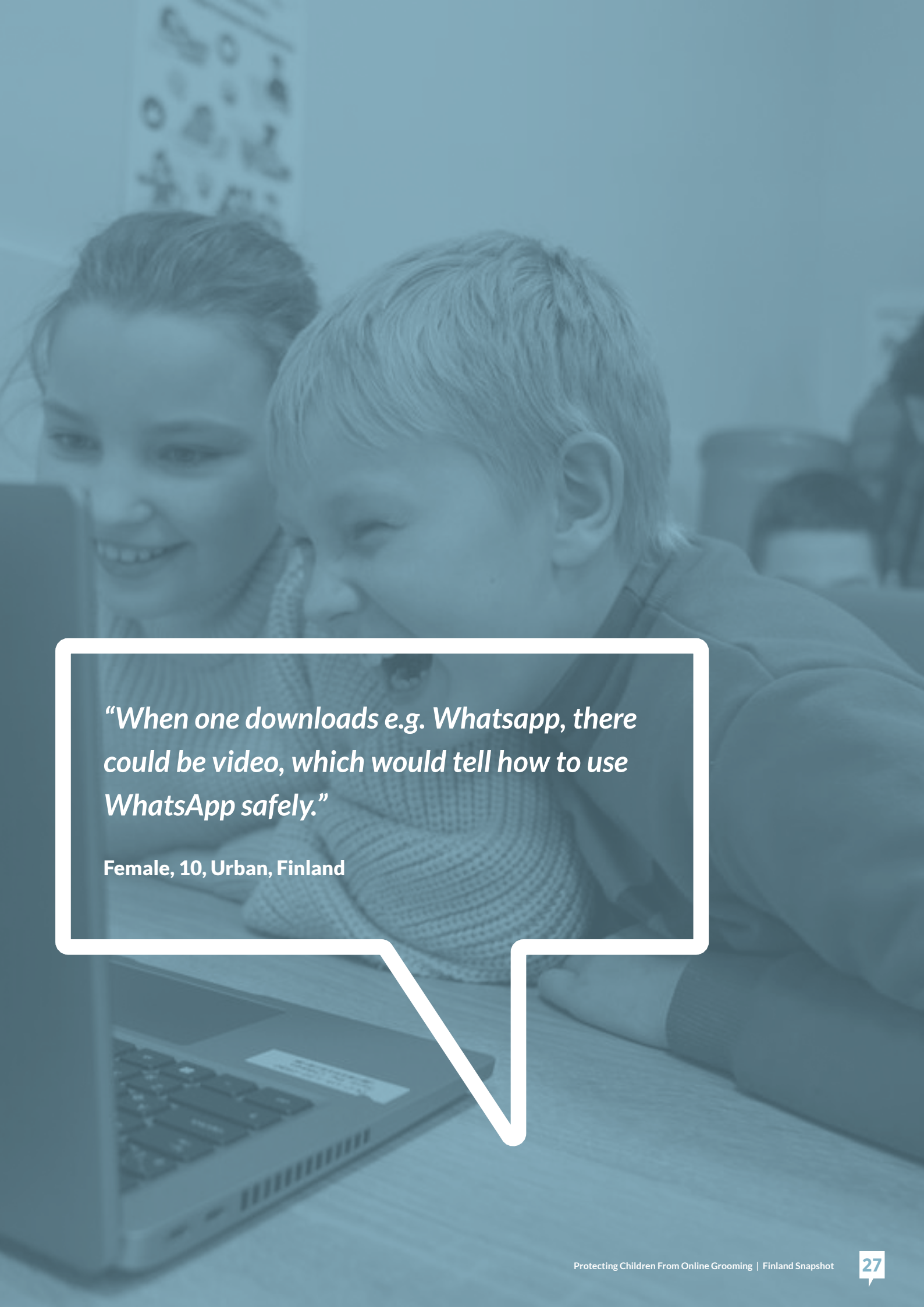
10

Ensure platform features do not exacerbate the risk that children and young people might be exposed to bad actors online.



For detailed recommendations and the responsibilities of key stakeholders, please see [Protecting Children from Online Grooming: Cross-cultural, qualitative and child-centred data to guide grooming prevention and response](#) | Save the Children's Resource Centre.



A young girl with short blonde hair is sitting at a desk, looking intently at a laptop screen. A woman with dark hair is leaning over her shoulder, also looking at the screen and smiling. The scene is set in what appears to be a classroom or office environment. The entire image has a light blue overlay.

*“When one downloads e.g. Whatsapp, there could be video, which would tell how to use WhatsApp safely.”*

**Female, 10, Urban, Finland**