



Pelastakaa Lapset



WORDS SHAPE REALITY

**Guidelines for Journalists Reporting on
Child Sexual Abuse**



Words Shape Reality – Guidelines for Journalists Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse

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1. Why is it important to address child sexual abuse?

Did you know:

- One in five children in Europe are victims of sexual abuse.¹
- It is estimated, that over 300 million children a year are victims of online sexual abuses.²
- In 2023, NCMEC's Cyber Tipline, the US hotline, received over 36 million reports of child sexual abuse.³

Child sexual abuse is a global problem that can affect any child, regardless of where they live – having a device with internet access is all it takes. Any child can be subjected to sexual abuse, because in all environments where there are children, there may be adults who want to commit sexual abuse against them.

Journalists have the opportunity to bring broad social issues, such as child sexual abuse, into public debate. This power also comes with responsibility.

When addressing child sexual abuse, the chosen words and the way the phenomenon is described influence public attitudes, knowledge, and sense of responsibility. To ensure that reporting on child sexual abuse is appropriate and respects the rights of the child, it is important not only to use proper terminology but also to carefully weigh, among other things, the public's right to information against the child's right to privacy.

The majority of child sexual abuse still goes unreported to authorities, which is another reason why it is important to discuss the issue. This can help lower the threshold for victims of sexual abuse to report the crimes and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Since 2002, the Finnish Hotline Nettivihje has worked to prevent and combat child sexual abuse, particularly in digital environments. This work is based on the child's right to be protected from all forms of violence.

With this guide, we want to help journalists succeed in their work when addressing and reporting on child sexual abuse. This is a sensitive topic that involves challenging terminology, and this guide provides practical advice on how to discuss child sexual abuse in a way that respects the rights of the child.

¹ Council of Europe <https://human-rights-channel.coe.int/stop-child-sexual-abuse-in-sport-en.html>

² Childlight <https://www.childlight.org/into-the-light-2024/>

³ The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children <https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/2023-Cyber-Tipline-Report.pdf>

2. What does child sexual abuse mean?

Child sexual abuse (CSA) refers to all acts that violate a child's sexual integrity and right to self-determination. Sexual abuse also serves as an umbrella term for sexual harassment and grooming. Children are defined as individuals under the age of 18.

Sexual abuse is any act that harms another person's sexuality, any attempt to do so, any unwanted sexual comment or approach that occurs without the other person's consent, regardless of the relationship between the persons involved.

Sexual abuse is a form of violence in which another person's boundaries are violated, for example, by touching, harassing, or coercing them. Sexual abuse can occur in any environment – at home, in public spaces, or online.

Examples of child sexual abuse include:

- Making sexually suggestive comments about a child's image or body
- Asking a child for a nude photo
- Sending sexually suggestive images or videos to a child
- Getting a child to act in a sexually suggestive manner in front of a camera
- Sexual acts against a child, e.g., child rape

Child sexual abuse is:

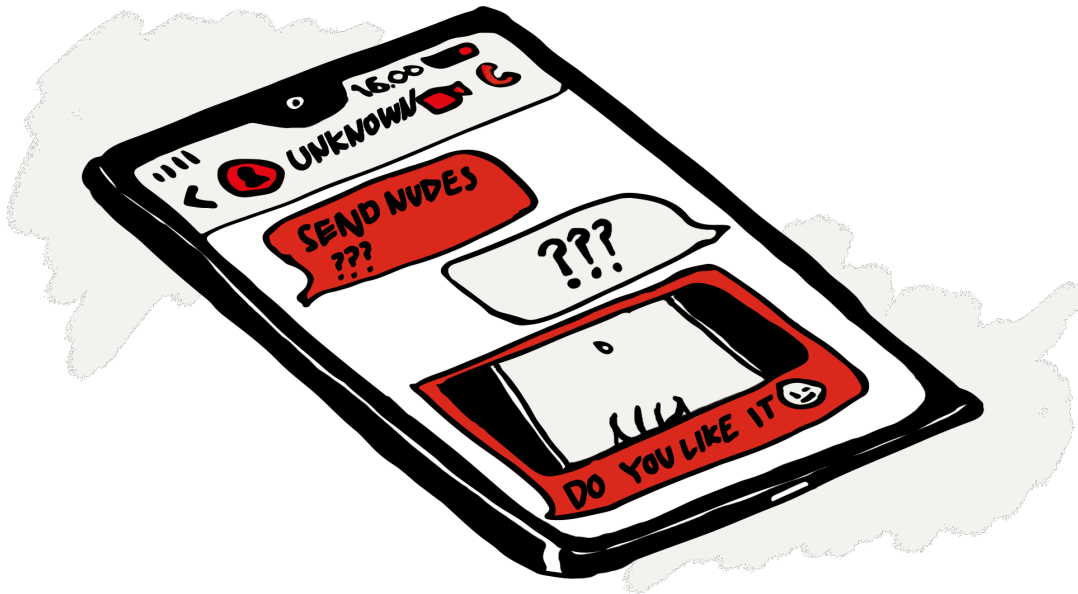
Sending nude photos	Inappropriate touching	Sexually suggestive comments	Harassment
Sexting	Secret filming	Groping	Rape
Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)	Showing/sending pornography	AI CSAM	Requesting nude photos
Inappropriate advances	Grooming	Sextortion	

Figure 1. Listed are examples of different forms of child sexual abuse.

Every child has the right to protection from all forms of violence.⁴ In child sexual abuse, an adult or a person significantly older than the child uses the child to satisfy their own sexual needs. Sexual abuse is the misuse of power. A child is never responsible for the sexual abuse they've experienced.

Sexual abuse can have many different effects on a child and their development. Therefore, it is important that the child receives support and help from professionals to process what has happened. A child or person who has experienced sexual abuse as a child should not have to deal with their experiences alone.

Child sexual abuse is a crime, and it must be addressed. This ensures that the child receives help. [The Finnish Criminal Code \(1889/39\)](#) has specific definitions and age limits for different forms of sexual abuse. If you suspect that a child has been sexually abused, you must always report it to the police and child welfare services.



⁴ [Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:](#)

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.
2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

3. How child sexual abuse is covered in the media

Taking ethical considerations into account is particularly important when addressing sensitive issues such as sexual abuse – especially when it comes to minors, who are subject to an even greater duty of protection.

According to the Finnish Journalist's Guidelines, the public has a right to know what is happening in society, and journalists are obliged to strive for truthful reporting. When addressing topics such as child sexual abuse, respect for human dignity, protection of privacy, and sensitivity play a prominent role. Not all public matters are publishable. Particular caution must be exercised when covering matters concerning minors. The identity of victims of sensitive crimes must be protected.

3.1 COVERAGE OF CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS CONCERNING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

News reports on child sexual abuse often deal with criminal proceedings. As a result, the content uses legal terminology, which does not always accurately portray the severity of the offences.

In Finland, the new legislation on sexual offences came into force on January 1, 2023.⁵ Under this legislation, sexual offences against children are generally classified as more serious than before, and their penalties have been increased. The most significant change since the law came into force is that sexual intercourse with a child under 16 is now primarily classified as child rape, whereas it was previously considered sexual exploitation.

3.2 ETHICAL JOURNALISTS TAKE CHILD RIGHTS INTO ACCOUNT

Please consider the following when planning interviews about child sexual abuse:

- A child cannot consent to an interview in which they may have to revisit issues that are harmful to them. We therefore do not recommend having such discussions with children.
- The topic can be discussed with experts and adults who have experienced sexual abuse in their childhood and wish to share their experiences. Interviewing the parent of a child who has experienced sexual abuse may also be an option. In these situations, the privacy of the child, the safety of the interviewee, and their well-being after the interview must also be ensured.



⁵ Ministry of Justice <https://oikeusministerio.fi/en/sexualoffenceslaw>

4. Issues to pay attention to when reporting on child sexual abuse

As a journalist, you have the opportunity to bring important perspectives on child sexual abuse to the discussion: the phenomenon and its extent, consequences, prevention, and seeking help.

4.1 USE TERMS THAT RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Be aware of how your choice of words shapes the reality you create. When dealing with content related to child sexual abuse, it is essential to approach the subject in a manner that respects child rights. Where possible, use the term "child" and avoid using the term "victim".

Terminology on child sexual abuse is divided into three categories, referring to the Luxembourg Guidelines. These guidelines were developed through international collaboration among nearly twenty organisations, after recognising a need to standardise terms and definitions related to child protection.

The categories are:

- **Green**, i.e. safe terms recommended for use.
- **Orange**, i.e., terms that may be difficult for children or other groups to understand. Orange terms should only be used with caution, and you should be prepared to explain their meaning in more detail.
- **Red**, i.e., terms that are not recommended for use at all, unless their use is absolutely necessary, for example, when referring to specific legislation.

WE RECOMMEND:

Child sexual abuse: Covers all physical and non-physical acts that violate a child's sexual integrity. Use child sexual abuse as an umbrella term, as sexual harassment or grooming, for example, are forms of child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is a human rights violation that affects the growth and development of children.

Sexual offence against a child: This term is clear and neutral when referring to criminal proceedings or other matters covered by criminal law.

Grooming, i.e. the solicitation of a child for sexual purposes: Refers to soliciting a child into a situation with the intention of sexually abusing them either online, offline, or in both environments.

Sexual harassment of a child: Verbal, nonverbal, and/or physical unwanted behavior intended to violate a child's dignity. Sexual harassment is child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM): Refers to image and video materials in which a child is subjected sexual abuse or in which the child is sexualized. This material is proof of a crime.

Self-generated CSAM: Refers to sexually suggestive images or video material taken by the child themselves, often due to adult pressure or instigation.

Material that sexualizes a child: This includes, for example, images in which a child poses in sexually suggestive clothing and accessories, semi-naked or naked. The term should not be used about material depicting child sexual abuse.

USE WITH CAUTION:

Sextortion, or Sexual extortion of children: Refers to the blackmail or extortion of children using sexually suggestive material they have taken or shared themselves. Sextortion can also occur between adults.

Child rape: A term in criminal law that is descriptive in itself, but often refers solely to physical, penetrative acts, and is therefore a narrow description of all sexual abuse.

WE DO NOT RECOMMEND:

Child pornography: This refers to material that depicts child sexual abuse. Child pornography is a term that violates child rights. Pornography is intended for adults, rooted in consent and considered entertainment. Child sexual abuse is violence and a crime.

Child prostitute: A child can never consent to sexual activity with an adult and cannot be a "sex worker." This is a child who has been subjected to sexual abuse and is often a victim of human trafficking.

TIP!

You can check the correct terminology in the Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, also known as the Luxembourg Guidelines:
<https://ecpat.org/luxembourg-guidelines/>

The person was in
possession of
~~child pornography~~
child sexual abuse
material.



4.2 THE PERPETRATOR IS ALWAYS RESPONSIBLE

In cases of sexual abuse, responsibility always lies with the perpetrator, never with the child. Regardless of the child's appearance, prior relationship or responsiveness to the perpetrator, risky behaviour, or intoxication, responsibility for sexual abuse lies solely with the perpetrator.

It is important to make the perpetrator the subject of the sentence, whilst the object should be the victim of abuse. The wording used when addressing child sexual abuse should leave no doubt about who bears responsibility for what happened. The used terms shape the reader's perceptions of the issue, and softening the wording can dilute their meaning.

Another child may also be a perpetrator of sexual abuse. It is important to remember that even in such cases where the child has committed a crime, he/she is still a child and should be referred to in a manner that respects the rights of the child.

The public's tendency to victim-blame is a major concern for victims of sexual abuse. Only a few other crimes subject victims to such scrutiny, or even retaliation, when being reported.

TIP!

Pay attention to your choice of words and sentence structure so that they do not obscure the perpetrator's responsibility and blame or belittle the victim of sexual abuse.

A child who has been subjected to abuse is never to blame for what has happened.

Examples of accurate expressions:

Not like this	Like this
The person was in possession of child pornography .	The person was in possession of child sexual abuse material .
The person who kept a minor as a sex slave had another victim.	The person who sexually enslaved the minor also sexually abused another child.
The perpetrator is charged with sex with a minor.	The perpetrator is charged with the rape of a child.
The child photographed himself/herself naked at the request of an adult .	The adult enticed/pressured the child to photograph themselves naked.
Based on the preliminary investigation, a man under the age of 18 is suspected of planning a serious sexual offence.	Based on the preliminary investigation, a young person under the age of 18 is suspected of planning a serious sexual offence.
The perpetrator had sex with a 10-year-old.	The perpetrator raped a 10-year-old.
The amount of child pornography produced by artificial intelligence is growing exponentially.	The amount of child sexual abuse material produced by artificial intelligence is growing exponentially.
Child pornography produced by children themselves is spreading on the internet.	Self-generated child sexual abuse material is being distributed on the internet.
An adult was in an intimate relationship with a 14-year-old .	An adult committed sexual abuse against a 14-year-old .

4.3 LINK THE ISSUE TO A BROADER SOCIAL CONTEXT

Reporting on child sexual abuse is often linked to cases that are handled in court, where the matter is addressed from a criminal law perspective. It is important to note that the incident should not be presented as an isolated event, as this may narrow the perspective on the broader social problem and its prevention.

The media and journalists can help the public understand that child sexual abuse is not just a series of isolated incidents, but a broader human rights issue that has a significant impact on communities and societies.

The key is to raise awareness, educate readers, and engage in dialogue with experts and authorities.

TIP!

Journalists can contact NGOs to find content that helps the public understand the serious, lifelong consequences of child sexual abuse. Experts from NGOs also have insights on how to solve this social problem. Addressing the issue and covering the topic helps to break down taboos.

4.4 HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE PHENOMENON

Unfortunately, child sexual abuse is common. Coverage of the topic should include information about the extent of the phenomenon and the circumstances surrounding it.

Anyone can encounter sexual abuse, although statistics show that sexual abuse is, in part, gendered and that some population groups are more vulnerable to it than others.

Similarly, anyone, regardless of age, gender, or background, can commit child sexual abuse.

It is therefore important to provide the public with:

- Information about how child sexual abuse can occur and what it encompasses.
- Information about warning signs and ways to protect themselves and others.
- Information on where to find help and support.

TIP!

Information on child sexual abuse and its prevention can be found in international sources such as [Childlight](#), [the Internet Watch Foundation](#) and [INHOPE](#), as well as from authorities, organizations, researchers, and experts.

4.5 RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ABUSE

When a child has been subjected to sexual abuse, it is essential that journalists carefully consider what information should be shared with the public. Children have a right to privacy, respect, human dignity, and an objective presentation of events. It is important to omit details that could cause further harm to the child. Public discussion of the abuse may arouse strong feelings and shame in the child and their family, which may affect the child's recovery.

The reporter must assess when alerting the public necessitates disclosing sensitive details and when doing so would only retraumatize the child or create blame on him or her. It is important to note that the wording used may reveal personal information about the child or raise suspicions, which could put them in greater danger and discourage others from reporting similar experiences.

TIP!

It is important to consider the balance between the child's right to privacy and the public's right to information. Children have the right to privacy, respect, human dignity, and a factual presentation of events.

Children have the right to protection – always.

4.6 AVOID SENSATIONALISM

When discussing child sexual abuse, it is important to avoid sensationalism, as it distorts understanding of the broader context of the phenomenon and spreads fear without offering support or solutions. Use language accurately and carefully.

When reporting on child sexual abuse or CSAM, avoid unnecessary visual and sexualized descriptions. Such details do not benefit the child and may lead to their re-traumatization, as children also read the news and have access to the internet.

Do not use language that implies consent. A child can never give valid consent to sexual activity with an adult. Therefore, expressions used to describe consensual sexual relationships should not be used in the narrative.

TIP!

Consider what kind of detail is necessary for the content and what might be considered sensationalism. Do not use language that implies consent.

4.7 OFFER PERSPECTIVES ON PREVENTION

The crimes that some children experience are shocking. Child sexual abuse is a social problem that requires action across society.

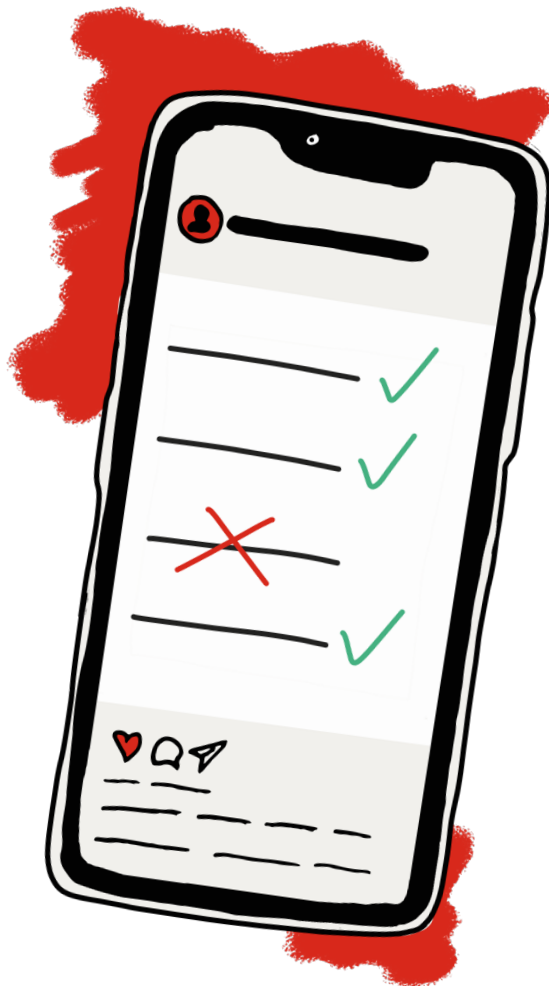
In order to highlight the extent of the phenomenon and enable society to combat child sexual abuse, the media can offer perspectives on prevention.

Highlighting solutions and appropriate courses of action also helps to create hope.

Content that offers practical steps to help create a safe and stable environment for children is far more effective for prevention than simply describing acts of violence.

TIP!

Preventing child sexual abuse requires action throughout society. No single entity can solve the problem on its own; action is needed at all levels, from legislation to individual behaviors.



4.8 PROVIDE INSTRUCTIONS

Content related to child sexual abuse can have a big impact on audiences, especially if they've experienced sexual abuse themselves. Providing instructions and advice can help audiences consider how to act when they witness child sexual abuse, how to protect children, or where to get help.

TIP

At the end of the article, it is a good idea to include a tip box with instructions and/or sources of help.

EXAMPLES

Adults, here's how you can protect children online:

1. It is important to ask your child about their experiences and thoughts online as part of everyday conversations.
2. It is also good to ask if anything has happened that made them feel uncomfortable or confused.
3. Take daily interest in your child's life. This will make it easier for them to bring up any concerns they may have.
4. Sex education, which includes teaching children about online sexual abuse, is an important way to protect children.

You can report material you suspect to be illegal, child sexual abuse material or related activities, to the police or a hotline, such as [Nettivihje](#). A mere suspicion is enough.

Help and support services for children and adults:

Assistance and support services are listed, for example, on the [Save the Children website](#).

Further information

Save the Children Finland: [Nettivihje](#)

INHOPE: [Shaping the Story - Media Guidelines for Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse](#)

ECPAT: [Luxembourg Guidelines](#)

Checklist for journalist on reporting on child sexual abuse

- 1. Use terms that respect the rights of the child**
Confirm the terms. For example, talk about child sexual abuse material, not child pornography.
- 2. Remember that the perpetrator is always responsible**
The child is never responsible for what has happened. The responsibility always lies with the perpetrator, and this responsibility should not be obscured by, for example, the choice of words or sentence structure.
- 3. Link the issue to a broader social context**
Raise awareness. This is not about individual cases, but a widespread social problem.
- 4. Help people understand the phenomenon**
Provide information. This will help the public understand and form opinions about child sexual abuse.
- 5. Respect the rights of the child and the perspective of children who have experienced abuse**
Consider the child's perspective. It is important to carefully weigh the child's right to privacy against the public's right to information.
- 6. Avoid sensationalism**
Consider how much detail is necessary to share. Avoid unnecessary visual and sexualized descriptions and language that implies consent.
- 7. Offer perspectives on prevention**
Help create hope. Child sexual abuse is not something that just happens; society can take action at every level to prevent it.
- 8. Provide instructions**
Provide guidance. With the right instructions, the public will get the information and help they need.





Pelastakaa Lapset

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Together, we safeguard every child's right to life, protection, learning, and participation in Finland and around the world.

Because children's future starts now.

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