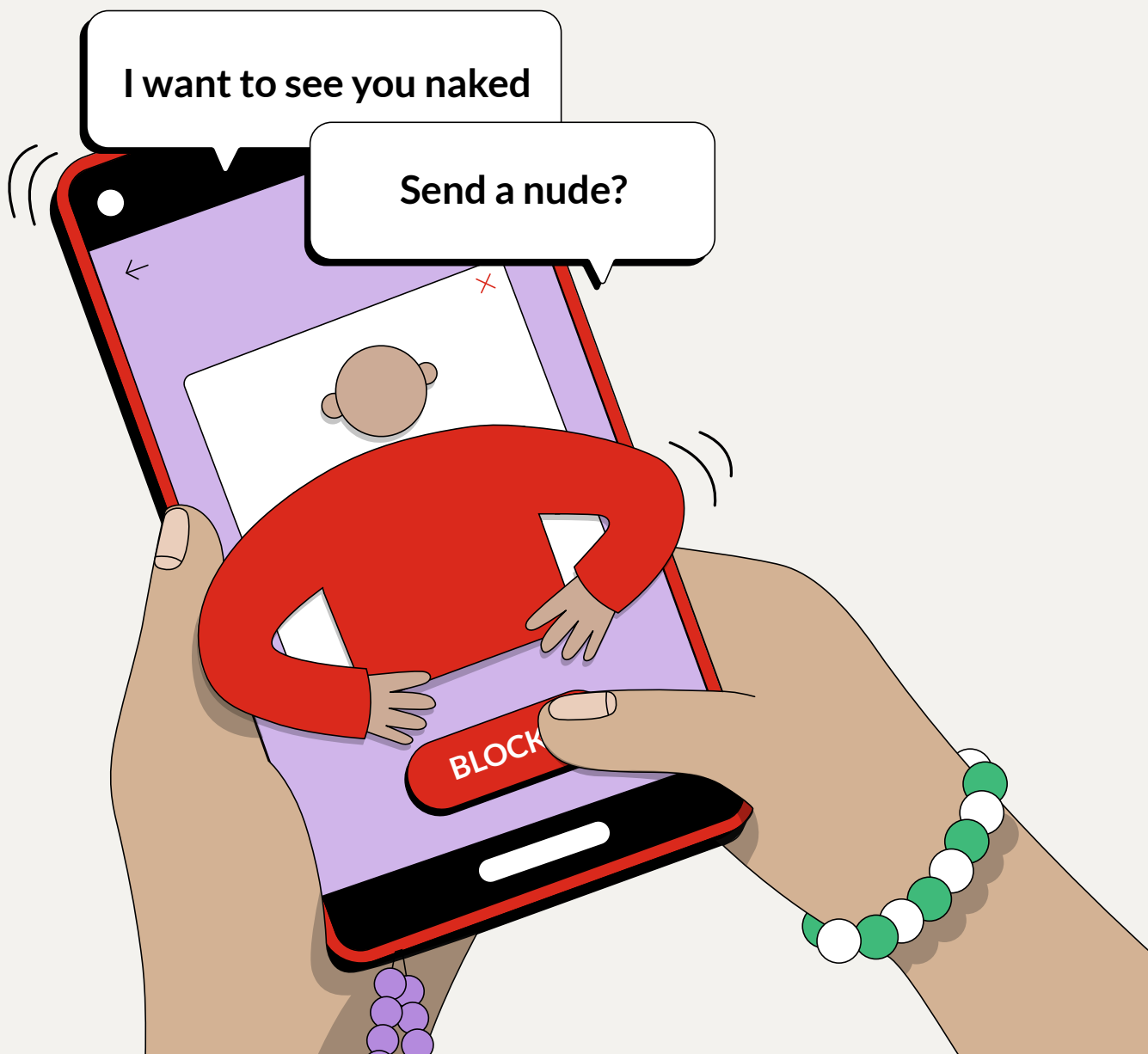




Save the Children

IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME

**Experiences of 11-to-17-year-old-children on online sexual abuse
and sexting among peers**



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Terms

Child sexual abuse

Sexual abuse refers to all acts that violate a child's sexual integrity and right to self-determination. Sexual abuse can occur between children and be perpetrated by adults. Sexual abuse may include, for example, sending sexually explicit comments and messages or showing pornographic material to a child. It can take the form of enticing a child for sexual purposes (grooming), touching a child's body and raping a child, among other things. Sexual abuse may involve manipulation, threats, extortion and/or coercion. Sexual abuse can occur in any environment, such as at home, in public spaces and online. This report is about online sexual abuse in particular.

Sexting

Sexting refers to receiving, sending or forwarding sexual messages, images and videos. Sexual messaging can be a way for a child to express their own sexuality. Sexting is acceptable when it is consensual and takes place between peers at the same developmental level. Consent must always be obtained from all those involved in the communications. It is not sexting when the other party to the communication is an adult or a person clearly older than the child.

In the reports results section and reflection, sexual text-based messaging between peers and the sending of sexual images and videos are examined as different themes, as the children were asked about these separately.

Child and adolescent

In this report, both the words "child" and "adolescent" refer to persons under the age of 18. In the background section of the report, the term "adolescent" is used when talking about sexting between peers, as sexting is more commonly a part of interactions between adolescents. However, the term "child" is used throughout the results section to make the presentation of the results more consistent. When discussing sexual abuse perpetrated by adults, the term "child" is always used.

Children of other gender

The gender of the child was asked in the survey. The options were "girl", "boy", "other" and "I don't want to answer". The term "children of other gender" is used in the report and refers to respondents who selected "other" as their gender in the survey.

Abstract

As the internet and social media have become an established part of children's everyday lives, sexting between peers and sexual abuse online have also become more common. In Finland, there has been little research on sexting between children. The aim of this report was to survey the prevalence of sexting between peers and children's views on it. In addition, this report examined both sexual abuse between peers and sexual abuse against children perpetrated by adults online. The respondents to the survey were 4,106 children aged 11–17.

More than a quarter of the children reported that they had received a sexual message, and 15 per cent had sent one themselves during the past year. The sending of sexual images was often related to dating relationships, but children most often received sexual images from unknown people. The majority of children who received sexual images had also received unwanted images. Receiving these images was slightly more common among younger children. The children were predominantly cautious about sexting: some accepted sexting under certain conditions (trust, consent, dating), but many felt negatively about it.

One third (31%) of the children who responded to the survey said they had been contacted online by an adult or a person at least five years older than them, and the majority (67%) of these children had experienced sexual abuse. One fifth (21%) of all children who responded to the survey had experienced sexual abuse by both a peer and an adult. The most common form of sexual abuse among peers was receiving unwanted sexual messages and images. When perpetrated by adults, the most common experience was receiving sexual messages from an adult, but other forms of abuse, such as requests to perform sexual acts on video, were also reported. A quarter of the children had been offered a reward in return for sexual acts. Experiences of sexual abuse perpetrated by adults were highlighted among girls (33%) and children of other gender (20%). The children rarely told anyone about their experiences of sexual abuse. If they did, they usually told a friend. The children told someone about the experience of sexual abuse because the experience felt distressing, but a large proportion of the children's responses also indicated that the incident did not feel serious to them. This reflects the duality of the phenomenon: online sexual abuse is seen as both distressing and commonplace.

According to the results, sexting between peers is a risk factor for sexual abuse by both peers and adults. The children may not have been able to distinguish between sexting and sexual abuse, which indicates that they need more information on safe internet usage and evidence-based sexual education. On the other hand, some of the children were well aware of the risks related to sexting and sexual abuse. Prevention measures should be targeted at even younger children and their parents. The platforms where sexual abuse takes place also have a responsibility for preventing sexual abuse.

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a serious and diverse phenomenon that affects an estimated one in five children in Europe (Council of Europe). Sexual abuse can occur in many different environments – at home, in public spaces or online – and is associated with many different background factors (Kloppen et al., 2016; Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019). Sexual abuse refers to acts in which a person is subjected to a sexual act without their consent. When the person is under the age of 18, this is referred to as child sexual abuse.

As the internet and social media have become part of every child's everyday life, sexual abuse has also moved to online environments (Turner et al., 2023). As an environment, the internet has opened up even more opportunities for increasingly diverse ways of perpetrating sexual abuse. Sexual abuse occurring online can include, for example, sending unwanted sexually explicit messages, images and videos, requesting nude images or using them for extortion (Finkelhor et al., 2022). Online sexual abuse can be committed by both adults and other children. In addition to facilitating sexual abuse, the internet allows for image and video materials to be stored and disseminated, which means that the child becomes a victim repeatedly (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020). Compared to in-person sexual abuse, online sexual abuse is more difficult to understand and identify in terms of both risk factors and consequences, which in turn poses challenges to its prevention (Assink et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2023).

As the use of the internet and various instant messaging services has become more common, sexting between peers has also become more common over the past decade. This may also have been influenced by the development of society, where sexuality and sexualisation are more strongly present in the media and online. This is reflected in children's everyday life and their perception of themselves, sex and intimate relationships. Sexting means sending, receiving and transmitting sexual messages, images and videos (Madigan et al. 2018; Mori et al. 2022). Adolescents send sexual messages for various reasons, such as creating and maintaining social relationships and strengthening their own self-image (Cooper et al., 2016; Gargano et al., 2022). Sexting can support the sexual development of adolescents (Cooper et al., 2016), but it has also been found to increase the risk of different experiences of abuse (Turner et al., 2023).

This report provides up-to-date information on two phenomena: sexual messaging between peers and online sexual abuse by peers and adults. In this report, we use the term “sexting” for sexual messaging between peers. The report examines the prevalence of sexting between peers, its content and motives as well as related thoughts. The report also examines both online sexual abuse between peers and online child sexual abuse by adults or a person at least five years older than the child. The report highlights how common online child sexual abuse is and what kind of characteristics are associated with it.

1 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON SEXTING BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS

In this section, sexual messaging between peers is referred to as **sexting**. Sexting refers to both written messages and images and videos.

In this section, when talking about sexting between peers, the term **adolescent** is used, as sexting is more commonly part of adolescent interaction.

Sexting refers to receiving, sending or transmitting sexual messages, images and videos (Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2022). Messages can be sent from a computer, mobile phone or other mobile device. Sexting between adolescents can take place in different kinds of relationships (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018) and there are various reasons behind it (Cooper et al., 2016; Bragard & Fisher, 2022; Ojeda et al., 2022). Although sexting is generally seen as a normal part of an adolescent's life and development, it can have negative consequences.

A key aspect of sexting between adolescents is mutual consent, which means that all parties participate in sexting voluntarily and of their own will. Consent given once is not sufficient; it must be requested again every time. It is possible that adolescents do not fully understand the significance of consent and do not always recognise whether the messaging takes place with a mutual understanding. Adolescents may also not know what kind of activity is acceptable and what kind of activity is illegal. For example, sharing a nude photo of another adolescent without their permission or extortion using a photo is sexual abuse and also possibly a crime. Recognising and respecting one's own and others' boundaries protects against sexual abuse.

1.1 Prevalence and characteristics of sexting

Sexting among adolescents has become significantly more common in the 2000s (Madigan et al., 2018). However, this increase seems to have reached a plateau at the turn of the 2010s and 2020s, when an average of one fifth (19%) of adolescents had sent and just over one third (35%) had received sexual messages (Mori et al. 2022). Sending sexual messages is more common among adolescents (22%) than sending sexual images and videos (12%) (Molla-Esparza et al., 2020). Sexting most typically occurs in dating relationships or with an object of infatuation (Barroso et al., 2023).

Sending sexual messages is linked to age, and participation in sexting becomes more common with age (Madigan et al., 2018; Molla-Esparza et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2022). Various results have been obtained on the connection between gender and sexting: in some studies, girls have been found to participate more actively in sexting than boys (Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2022) and in others, boys have been found to be more active in sexting than girls (Ojeda et al., 2020; Barroso et al., 2023). On the other hand, not all studies have found a difference between girls and boys, but transgender and adolescents of other gender have been found to participate in sexting more often than cisgender adolescents (Seto et al., 2023). Adolescents with an open and outgoing personality are more prone to sexting, as are adolescents who spend a lot of time online and on social media (Barroso et al., 2023).

1.2 Motives and thoughts behind sexting

Adolescents send sexual messages for different reasons and from different starting points. Sexting can be seen as part of dating (Cooper et al., 2016; Ojeda et al., 2022) and as a way to get closer to a partner, such as in a long-distance relationship (Gargano et al., 2022). Sexting can be a means of expressing and exploring one's own sexuality, which is part of an adolescent's normal development (Gargano et al., 2022). On the other hand, sexting can be based on seeking attention, improving one's own social status among adolescents and strengthening one's own self-image (Bragard & Fisher, 2022). In addition to positive sexual attention, social pressure appears to be a key reason for sexting. Pressure to engage in sexting may come from a partner, or it may be a broader pressure produced by a peer group and the adolescent's desire to be popular (Bragard & Fisher, 2022; Gargano et al., 2022; Ojeda et al., 2022). Pressure from a dating partner in particular often seems to lead to sexting and creates a risk of sexual abuse (Gargano et al., 2022).

The attitudes of adolescents and the norms prevailing among friends affect the prevalence of sexting. A positive attitude towards sending sexual messages and non-consensual sharing as well as the assumption that others in a circle of friends share their images increase the likelihood of sharing their own images (Seto et al., 2023; Cucci et al., 2024). In a report that looked at what adolescents believe other adolescents think about sexting, nearly half (46%) thought that others feel positively about it, especially when sending sexual messages to a person they feel is trustworthy, such as a dating partner. In addition, the adolescents emphasised mutual consent as key. Among adolescents, 37 per cent felt that other adolescents did not accept sexting. The main reasons were thought to be the risk of images spreading and the fact that sexting with strangers is considered inappropriate (Burén et al., 2022).

1.3 Consequences of sexting

Sexting has both positive and negative consequences for adolescents, and the content of the messages affects the consequences of sexting (Doyle et al., 2021). Sexual messages containing images and videos increase the risk of negative consequences more than sexual messages containing text alone (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018). The immediate consequences of sexting can be the resulting emotional experiences, such as joy and excitement; however, on the other hand, the messages can cause shame, disgust and fear. Sexting can have a long-term impact on the mental well-being of adolescents, improving their self-esteem, but it can also increase anxiety, stress and depression (Doyle et al., 2021).

Sexting can have positive effects on adolescents' social lives and can help to create social connections and strengthen bonds (Doyle et al., 2021; Barroso 2023). On the other hand, sexting can cause problems with relationships and reputation, such as conflicts and discriminatory behaviour (Doyle et al., 2021). Adolescents seem to recognise the risks associated with sexting well, even though they consider it mostly acceptable and norm-compliant behaviour (Burén et al., 2022).

Adolescents who engage in sexting are often more sexually active and engage in riskier behavior than other adolescents. Among other things, they have more unprotected sex and use substances more (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2021). Participating in sexting can increase the risk of being subjected to bullying, relationship violence and sexual abuse both online and offline (Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019; Doyle et al., 2021). Compared to other adolescents, adolescents who participate in sexting may also more easily end up committing sexual abuse against other adolescents (Doyle et al., 2021).

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse refers to all sexual acts that violate another person's sexual right to self-determination and integrity. Online child sexual abuse may include sexually explicit messaging, grooming, that is, enticing a child for sexual purposes, and producing, transmitting or selling child sexual abuse material or using it for extortion (Finkelhor et al., 2024). Sexual abuse between peers is most often related to sexting without consent or sexual extortion using images (Finkelhor et al., 2022). Sexual abuse may be carried out by an adult or a peer.

The Finnish Criminal Code (Criminal Code 39/1889, chapter 20) defines sexual abuse on the basis of consent. This means that the act is a crime if the person who is the subject of it does not voluntarily participate in the act. Consent is assessed in cases of sexual abuse between adolescents, but primarily not in situations where an adult or a person clearly older than the child commits sexual abuse against a child. In Finland, the age of consent is 16 years, which means that sexual acts committed by an adult against a child under the age of 16 are criminalised. The age of consent of 18 years is used when an adult who commits sexual abuse is in a position of power in relation to the child; for example, their own parent or a sports coach. The age of consent is also 18 years in the case of enticing a child for sexual purposes, possessing and disseminating child sexual abuse material, and purchasing and attempting to purchase sex.

Since the internet enables a huge number of new ways of committing sexual abuse and makes it even easier to commit it, sexual abuse occurring online is a multidimensional phenomenon. Compared to in-person sexual abuse, online sexual abuse further challenges the identification of children at risk and the assessment of the impacts of experiences of sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2023). Through the internet, the perpetrator can be in contact with several children around the world at the same time, making sexual abuse a cross-border crime. Increasingly, younger children experience sexual abuse (Taylor et al., 2021), as the perpetrator can use the internet to contact children of all ages who spend time online. On the internet, the perpetrator can also remain anonymous, which protects the perpetrator and reduces the risk of being caught. Perpetrators may present themselves as the child's peer or as significantly younger than their true age in order to gain the child's trust.

Online sexual abuse is strongly associated with child sexual abuse material. For example, a person who commits sexual abuse may record and save a video conversation with a child in which they have enticed, manipulated or coerced the child into performing sexual acts for themselves or another child. Child sexual abuse material may also be a sexually explicit photo taken by the child themselves, which the child's peer has started to disseminate. Child sexual abuse material may be sold or disseminated online, or it may be used to extort a child, in which case the child is repeatedly subjected to sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2023). Online contact can lead to face-to-face meetings and physical sexual abuse.

2.1 Prevalence and characteristics of sexual abuse

Globally, approximately 15 per cent of children have experienced sexual abuse in online environments (Finkelhor et al., 2022, 2024). Around 12 per cent of children have experienced sexual abuse by an adult online (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018). The majority of sexual abuse is committed against girls aged 14–17 (Turner et al., 2023). Sexual abuse committed by an adult online most commonly takes the form of enticement for sexual purposes or making sexual advances, such as requesting sexual images or asking sex-related questions, whereas sexual abuse between adolescents is most often related to non-consensual sexting or sexual extortion using images (Finkelhor et al., 2022).

The prevalence of online sexual harassment and sexual abuse in Finland has been studied through, for example, child victim surveys and school health surveys. According to the 2022 child victim survey, one fifth (21%) of sixth-grade girls and just over one third (36%) of ninth-grade girls had received sexually harassing messages online. Among both sixth and ninth-grade boys, 7–8 per cent had received sexually harassing messages. These experiences had multiplied compared to 2013, when 8 per cent of girls in ninth grade reported receiving such messages. According to the child victim survey, other experiences of sexual abuse, such as proposing sex, attempting to buy sex, receiving nude photos or requests for nude photos, had also become significantly more common between 2013 and 2022. However, according to the child victim survey, it was rare that getting to know someone online and meeting online acquaintances would have led to physical acts of sexual abuse (Mielityinen et al., 2023).

The results of the school health survey (2019, 2021, 2023) are similar to the child victim survey, although the increase in some forms of sexual abuse has slowed. In 2019, approximately one fifth (21%) of 8th–9th grade students reported experiencing disturbing sexual proposals or harassment during the past year. In 2021 and 2023, approximately one third of children reported similar experiences. Girls reported experiencing disturbing sexual proposals significantly more than boys. Upper secondary students reported more sexual harassment online than those in 8th–9th grade and vocational schools. Experiences of sexual abuse are more common among older children (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Finkelhor et al., 2022; Mielityinen et al., 2023). Typically in research, the prevalence of experiences of sexual abuse is examined while focusing on girls and boys separately, but more recent surveys show that people of other gender or with varying gender identities experience sexual abuse more often than others (Mielityinen et al., 2023).

The majority of sexual abuse by adults is committed by a male person aged 18–25 (Finkelhor et al., 2022). According to the child victim survey, approximately half of the sexual abuse by adults experienced by children in 2022 was committed by an unknown person, while in 2013, the perpetrator was most often a dating partner, friend or other acquaintance (Mielityinen et al., 2023). Sexual abuse in online environments may contribute to this development, as it is not always possible to identify the perpetrator of the abuse online. International research suggests that the perpetrator of online sexual abuse is most often someone that the child knows offline, and in approximately one third of cases, the perpetrator is unknown to the child (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Sutton & Finkelhor, 2024).

2.2 Risk factors of sexual abuse

The risk of becoming a victim of sexual violence is associated with many factors related to the child, the family and society. Studies show that girls (Pedersen et al., 2023) and those belonging to gender minorities (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018) are more likely to experience sexual abuse online than boys. Sexual minorities are also at greater risk of experiencing sexual abuse online (Sklenarova et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2023).

Children with an illness or disability (Assink et al., 2019; Mailhot Amborski et al., 2022), and children with hyperactivity or concentration problems (White et al., 2014; Snyder, 2015) are more likely to experience sexual abuse than other children. Mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety have been found to increase the risk of online sexual abuse (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018).

Parents and families also have an impact on the risk and occurrence of sexual abuse. The parent's care and interest in what the child does online and with whom they talk reduces the risk of experiences of sexual abuse (Pedersen et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2023). Studies also show that children who do not live with their biological parents are more likely to experience sexual abuse (Assink et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2023), and the risk is particularly directed at children placed outside the home (Ellonen et al., 2023).

Substance use, spending time in public spaces and participating in criminal or prohibited behaviour have traditionally been seen to increase the risk of experiencing abuse (Ellonen & Aaltonen, 2012; Assink et al., 2019; Kaakinen et al., 2021). On the other hand, behaviour that increases the risk of sexual abuse includes, for example, spending a lot of time online, talking to unknown people, participating in sexting, visiting websites intended for adults, meeting people online and presenting oneself as another person or differently than one actually is. In addition, a parent's low level of education has been associated with the risk of sexual abuse experienced online (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2023).

Compared to in-person sexual abuse, the risk factors of online sexual abuse are more contradictory and more difficult to understand (Assink et al., 2019). In-person sexual abuse can usually be predicted by factors such as gender, other experiences of violence and a substance use or crime-positive lifestyle. These factors may not apply in the same way to online sexual abuse (Pedersen et al., 2023).

2.3 Special features of sexual abuse between peers – from sexting to sexual abuse

Participating in sexting is seen to increase the risk of both experiencing and sexually abusing a peer online and offline (Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019; Doyle et al., 2021). If the adolescent sends sexual messages to another person or forwards these messages without their consent, this may constitute sexual abuse even if it is not deliberate or does not involve intentional harm to the other person. Adolescents may forward a nude photo sent by a peer that was taken by the peer themselves, adolescents may take a nude photo of their peer in secret or use artificial intelligence to make a nude photo of them. Artificial intelligence has also brought new opportunities for sexual abuse. Sexual extortion of children (also known as sextortion) can also be involved in sexual abuse between adolescents. Mutual consent, that is, the voluntary participation of all parties, separates sexting from sexual abuse (Barroso et al., 2021).

Over the past year, approximately five to ten per cent of adolescents have said that they have forwarded a sexual message without permission, and three to ten per cent say that their own sexual message has spread (Barroso et al., 2021; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022; Seto et al., 2023). Compared to passing on sexual images, sexual extortion using images is not as common among adolescents. Every year, a little less than three per cent reported they had been subjected to extortion, and less than one per cent admitted that they had extorted a peer with a sexual image (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022). Both those who engage in sextortion and those who fall victims by it are more often younger children and/or children belonging to a sexual minority.

Non-consensual sexting, as well as sexting in general, become more common with age (Seto et al., 2023). For example, 2.5 per cent of 12–13-year-olds have reported having forwarded a sexual message during the past year, while the share of 16–17-year-olds is over 13 per cent (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022). The connection between gender and non-consensual sexting is not as clear (Barroso et al., 2021; Seto et al., 2023; Dodaj et al., 2024).

In sexual abuse between peers, the the child sexually abusing the other child is usually a current or former dating partner, especially when talking about sexual extortion or forwarding sexual messages as revenge after the end of a relationship (Barroso et al., 2021). Becoming a victim of sexual abuse between peers seems to partially involve the same risk factors as when the perpetrator is an adult. Risk factors include, for example, the divorce of the parents, the family's poor financial situation and the adolescent's risk behaviour, such as abundant use of the internet and alcohol (Kaltia-Heino et al., 2016, 2018; Barroso et al., 2021).

Social challenges, aggression, disregard, spending a lot of time online, use of dating applications and active use of a phone increase the risk of sending sexual messages without consent (Barroso et al., 2021; Seto et al., 2023; Dodaj et al., 2024). If sharing and receiving sexual images is considered common among friends, this predicts the sharing of peers' images without consent (Seto et al., 2023). A child's previous experiences of abuse seem to put the child more strongly at risk of sexual abuse, especially by adults, than abuse between peers does (Schaathun et al., 2024).

2.4 Effects of sexual abuse on children

Sexual abuse has many serious immediate and long-term psychological, physical and social consequences and impacts on the well-being and development of children (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2024). The emotional consequences of sexual abuse mostly include unpleasant emotional experiences, such as shame, guilt, disgust and fear, although the child may experience excitement or curiosity, for example (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020). Other psychological consequences include low self-esteem, aggression, self-destruction, anxiety and depression (Hailes, et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2019; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2024).

The effects of sexual abuse are also visible in social life, for example, in the desire to isolate, weakened social relationships and problems in school (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2024). Substance use may also increase (Reed et al., 2019). Sexual abuse has been found to increase the risk of developing various digestive disorders and chronic pain conditions (Ahlgren & Bildjuschkin, 2023).

Sexual abuse by adults harms children, as adults are responsible for caring for children and keeping them safe, but sexual abuse by peers can be just as harmful (Finkelhor et al., 2023). Especially sexual abuse between children who know each other can have a strong impact on the child's social status and reputation, which can prolong the harm caused by sexual abuse. Sexual abuse by friends or dating partners can be particularly hurtful and cause feelings of being betrayed (Barroso et al., 2023; Finkelhor et al., 2023).

2.5 Disclosing experiences of sexual abuse

Identifying children who have experienced sexual abuse online in particular is challenging, as the effects of the experiences are very diverse and manifest in different ways among children. In addition, things that are seen as typical risk factors for sexual abuse may not apply to online sexual abuse. Telling someone about the sexual abuse is often the only way for others to find out about a child's experiences. Talking about these experiences is key to getting help and support. The decision to tell someone about experiences of sexual abuse may be influenced by fear of the consequences of telling, concerns and beliefs about other people's reactions or feelings caused by the sexual abuse, such as shame and guilt (Morrison et al., 2018; Save the Children, 2021). In addition, talking about such experiences is influenced by opportunities to share, the desire to protect family members or compassion for the perpetrator (Morrison et al., 2018). Children may also only partially share their experiences (Larner, 2022), which means that it is crucial whether an adult picks up on the child's story.

Most children tell someone about their experiences of sexual abuse (Lahtinen et al., 2018; Save the Children 2021; Mielityinen et al., 2023). The majority tell a friend (Save the Children, 2021). An adult is slightly more likely to be told about their experiences if the perpetrator is over 30 years old and/or if the child experiences the situation as sexual abuse (Lahtinen et al., 2018). A younger child is also more likely to tell an adult about what has happened. However, only about one in ten children who have experienced sexual abuse tell the authorities (Lahtinen et al., 2018).

In Save the Children's "Grooming in the eyes of a child" survey (2021), one third (33%) and, in the 2022 child victim survey, one fifth (21%) of those who experienced sexual abuse by an adult did not tell anyone about their experiences. Most often, the reason was that the child did not think it was serious enough (75%), did not believe telling someone would help (45%), or they were too ashamed to tell (33%) (Save the Children, 2021). The same reasons for not telling anyone were also highlighted in the child victim survey (Mielityinen et al., 2023).

3 CONDUCTING THE SURVEY

The report is based on a survey in which data was collected from children aged 11–17 through an online Webropol survey in February–March 2025. It was possible to respond to the survey in Finnish and Swedish. The survey was sent to hundreds of schools by email and the survey form was shared on social media. A total of 4,106 children responded to the survey.

Before the survey was carried out, the form was piloted. Nine children and adolescents aged 11–18 participated in the pilot, and some questions and terms were clarified based on their comments. Three cities granted a research permit to conduct the survey. Instructions and information sheet (including a information sheet for guardians) were sent to all schools on the implementation of the survey.

Responding to the survey was voluntary for each child. At the beginning of the form, the first question asked about the child's willingness to participate in the survey. The question explained in an age-appropriate manner that participation is voluntary and that the child has the right to stop responding at any time. It was stated in the question that responses are anonymous and that respondents cannot be linked to the responses they provide. The children were asked whether they had understood these conditions and whether they agreed to respond. If the child consented, the report questions opened up for them. If the child did not give their consent, a website would open with links to child-friendly information about child sexual abuse. This was to make sure that the child had something else to do during the class if they did not want to respond to the survey.

Data analysis

Before analysing the data, respondents who did not want to participate in the survey were removed. In addition, approximately ten respondents who had responded to only the first two questions and 25 respondents who had clearly submitted several joking responses were removed from the survey. The criteria for exclusion from the material was that the open-ended responses contained clear joking responses that could not be interpreted as a response to the question. Additionally, the child had shown in the background questions, for example, that they did not respond to the questions truthfully. For example, the children could report having all possible health challenges or belonging to all minorities, but they also selected an option where they did not feel they belonged to a minority.

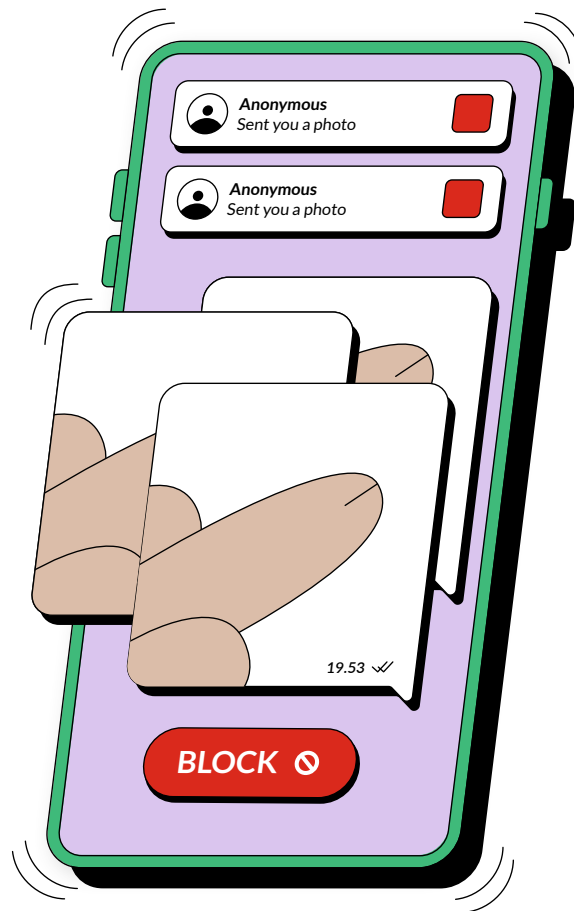
IBM SPSS Statistics software was used for the data analysis. Percentages (%) and numbers (n) were used to describe the material and phenomena. The quantitative analysis methods used are cross-tabulation, the chi-squared test and logistic regression analysis. The children's own, open responses were qualitatively analysed using a content-analytical approach.

Limitations

When reviewing the results, it was observed that 11-year-old children were overrepresented in many of the experiences and background factors examined in the report. This may be due to the fact that, compared to other age groups, a higher proportion of 11-year-olds responded via social media, which makes the data more selective on their part. On the other hand, overrepresentation in various background questions, such as absence from school, substance use, belonging to differ-

ent minorities and health challenges, can indicate that the youngest respondents either did not understand the questions or were joking in their responses. However, due to their small number, the selection of 11-year-olds does not affect the results when reviewing the overall data. However, the 11-year-olds are excluded from the more detailed reviews of the background factors of sexual abuse.

This report examines children's own experiences of sexual abuse online. Although the children were instructed to respond to questions regarding sexting, sending sexual images and videos between peers and by an adult separately, some of the children may not have been able to distinguish these in their responses. In other words, the children may have made their own definitions when responding to the questions, and these may differ somewhat from the definitions given in the instructions.



4 FINDINGS

For the sake of consistency in the presentation of the results the term **child** is used, also in the section when describing the results of sexting between adolescents.

4.1 Child respondents and their background information

A total of 4,106 children responded to the survey. The majority (82%, n=3,379) responded to the survey at school during class and a little less than a fifth (18%, n=727) through some other channel. Just over half of the respondents (51%, n=2,064) were girls. Boys accounted for 41 per cent (n=1,644), those of other gender for 3 per cent (n=108) and those who did not want to disclose their gender for 5 per cent (n=202). The majority of respondents were 13–15 years old, with each age group accounting for one-fifth of the respondents.

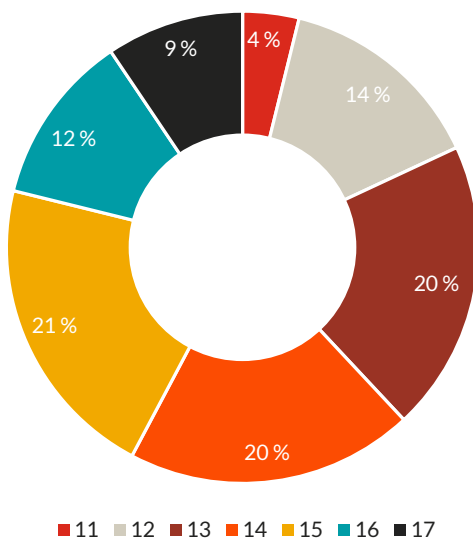


Figure 1. Children's age (n=4,020).

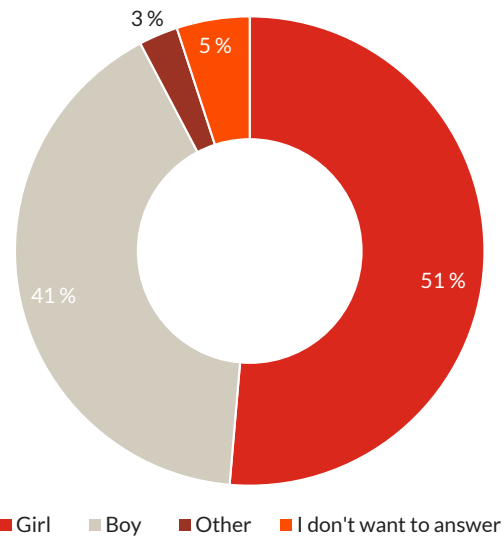


Figure 2. Children's gender (n=4,018).

In addition to Finnish, the most common mother tongues of the children were Swedish, Arabic and Russian. Almost half (48%, n=1,958) of the children said they live in a small city or municipality, just over one fifth (23%, n=957) in a large city and just under one fifth (17%, n=683) in the countryside. 61 per cent (n=2,519) of children lived primarily with two guardians, 15 per cent (n=612) with one guardian and 16 per cent (n=644) of the children lived alternately with each of their two guardians. Less than 3 per cent (n=106) of children reported living alone or with roommates, and 2 per cent (n=91) of children reported living in other ways, such as with a foster family. 12 per cent of children reported belonging to a sexual minority and 7 per cent reported belonging to a religious minority.

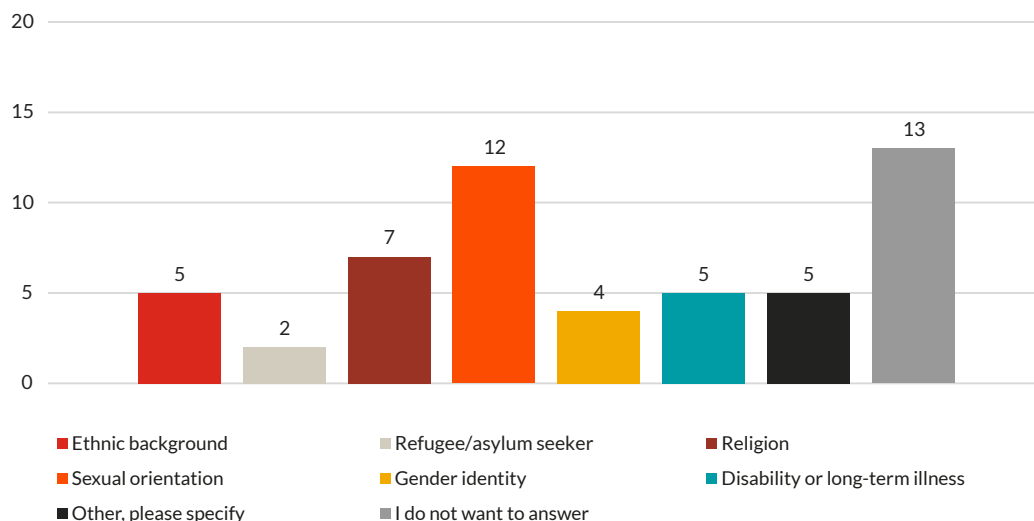


Figure 3. Children in different minority groups, % (n=3,567).

CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Nearly half of the children (44%, n=1,811) reported that they had some kind of health-related challenge. The most common challenges related to health and well-being were difficulties in remembering and concentrating, reported by more than a third of the children (31%, n=1,214–1,236). Just over one fifth (23%, n=957) of the children felt that their health was very good and 42 per cent (n=1,707) felt it was good. 5 per cent (n=192) felt their health was poor and less than 2 per cent (n=60) of children felt that their health was very poor.

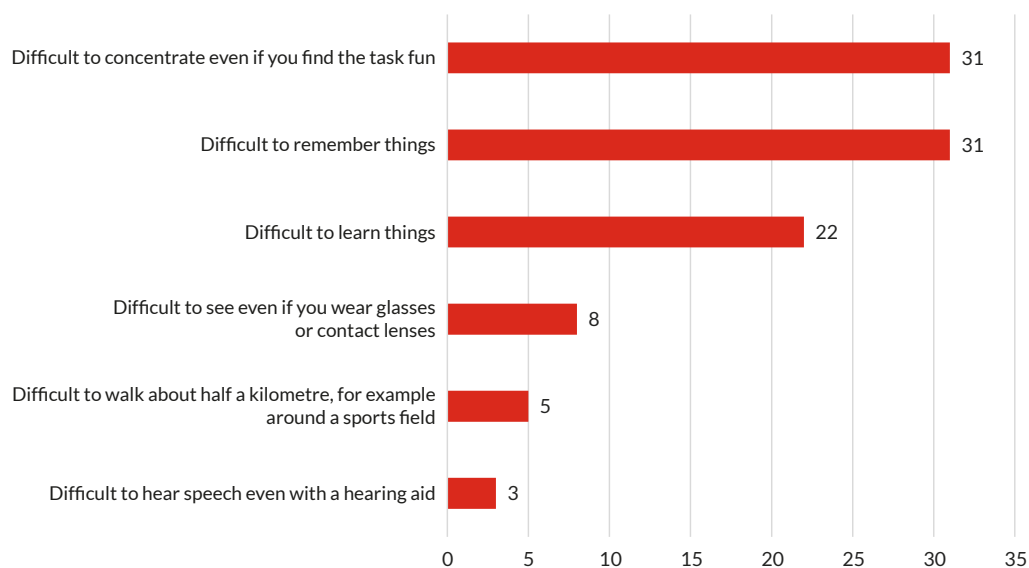


Figure 4. Challenges affecting health and well-being, % (n=3,972).

More than half (68%, n=2,673) of children aged 11–17 had never consumed alcohol, or at least not during the last year. The majority (18%, n=708) of those who said they had consumed alcohol had consumed it less than five times in a year. The use of alcohol was more common among girls and children of other gender than among boys. Of the children, 6 per cent (n=260) reported that they had tried a drug at some point. Use of substances was more common in older children.

4.2 Experiences of sexting with a peer

This section discusses receiving and sending sexual messages and sexual images and videos separately. The children were asked about these separately.

Sexual messaging and sexting refer to the receiving or sending of both messages and images and videos.

RECEIVING AND SENDING SEXUAL MESSAGES

This report examined children's participation in sending sexual messages and sexual images and videos between peers. Of the children, 27 per cent (n=1,114) said that they had received sexual messages and 15 per cent (n=598) that they had sent sexual messages to their peers within the last year. Both receiving and sending sexual messages became more common with age. More than half (54%, n=204) of 17-year-olds and 8 per cent (n=48) of 12-year-olds said they had received a sexual message. 37 per cent of girls (n=749) and 36 per cent of children of other gender (n=38) reported having received sexual messages, compared to 16 per cent of boys (n=260). Sexual messages were reported to have been sent by 24 per cent (n=26) of children of other gender, 18 per cent of girls (n=379) and 10 per cent (n=157) of boys.

RECEIVING AND SENDING SEXUAL IMAGES AND VIDEOS

This section discusses sexual **images** and **videos**. For the sake of readability, the text will refer to sexual images going forward, but this also includes videos.

During the past year, 21 per cent (n=873) of the children reported having received sexual images or videos from a peer. Correspondingly, 11 per cent (n=443) of children reported sending sexual images to a peer. Of girls and children of other gender, 15 per cent (girls n=307, children of other gender n=16) and 6 per cent of boys (n=93) had sent a sexual image to a peer. 30 per cent of girls (n=615), 19 per cent of children of other gender (n=21) and 11 per cent of boys (n=182) said that they had received a sexual image from a peer. In other words, boys are not as active in receiving and sending images as girls and children of other gender. Similar to sexting, sending and receiving sexual images was more common among older than younger children.

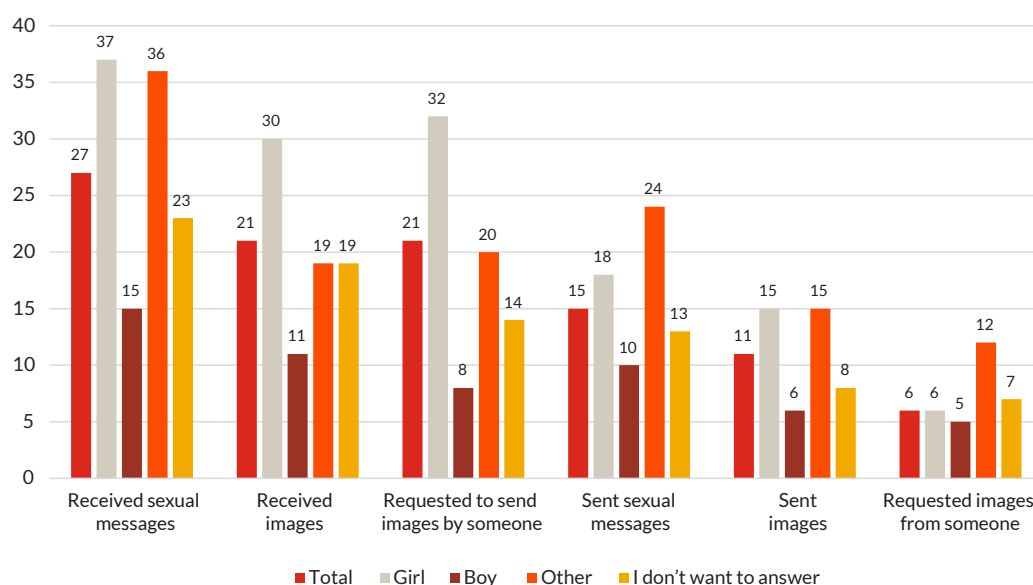


Figure 5. Prevalence of participation in sexting by gender and in total, %.

WHO DO CHILDREN SEND SEXUAL MESSAGES TO AND RECEIVE THEM FROM?

Children most commonly sent sexual messages to a dating partner (72%, n=432). Of those who sent sexual messages, 27 per cent (n=162) sent messages to a friend and 24 per cent (n=145) to an online acquaintance. Sexual messages were sent to friends more often by younger children than by older children. Of the children who sent sexual messages, 15 per cent (n=91) sent messages to unknown people.

Less than half (43%, n=481) of those who received sexual messages said they had received a sexual message from a dating partner, 26 per cent (n=289) from a friend, 52 per cent (n=585) from an unknown person and 24 per cent (n=272) from an online acquaintance.

WHO DO CHILDREN SEND SEXUAL IMAGES TO AND RECEIVE THEM FROM?

74 per cent (n=330) of those who sent sexual images said they sent them to their dating partner, 26 per cent (n=115) to an online acquaintance, 20 per cent (n=88) to an unknown person and 20 per cent (n=89) to a friend. More than half (55%) of those who received sexual images said they had received sexual images from a previously unknown person. 41 per cent of those who received sexual images reported receiving sexual images from a dating partner, 25 per cent from an online acquaintance and 20 per cent from a friend.

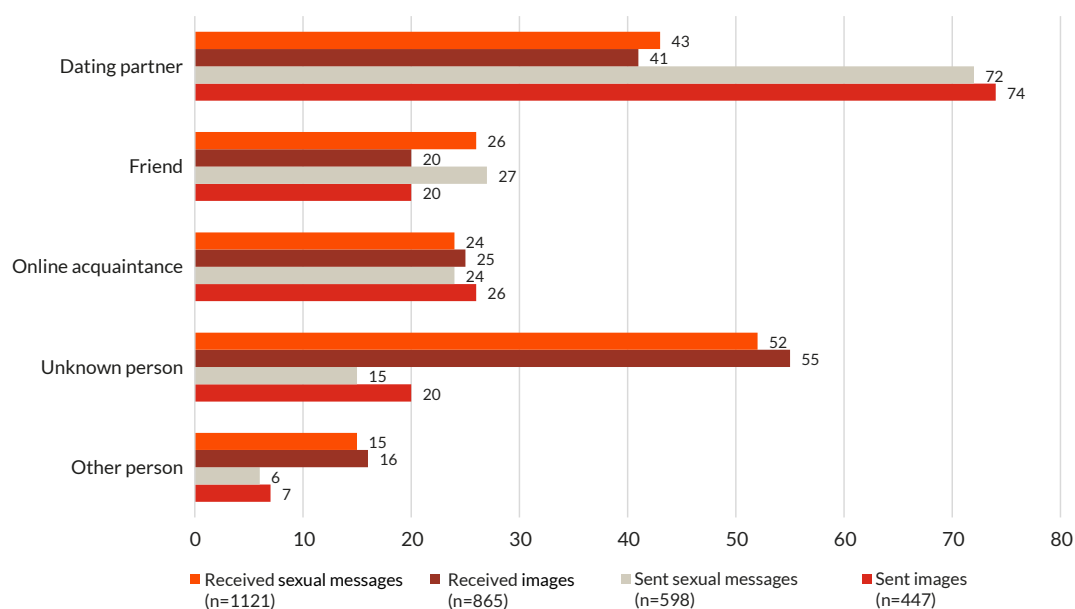


Figure 6. With whom do children engage in sexting, %.

The report also examined how common it is for children to ask their peers for sexual images. Of the children, 6 per cent (n=226) said they had asked for sexual images from a peer. Requesting images was more common in older age groups. Approximately one fifth (21%, n=848) of children said that a peer had asked them for a sexual image. Images were most often requested from girls and older children.

PRESSURE TO SEND SEXUAL MESSAGES AND SEXUAL IMAGES TO A PEER

Pressure to send sexual messages was reported by 6 per cent (n=226) of all children. Of the children who had participated in sexting, 18 per cent (n=216) said they experienced pressure to engage in sexting. Children aged 15–17 experienced the most pressure to engage in sexting: for example, 12 per cent of 17-year-olds reported pressure to send sexual messages, while the corresponding proportion of 12-year-olds was 2 per cent. 9 per cent of children of other gender and girls and 2 per cent of boys reported pressure to participate in sexting.

An open-ended question was asked about where the children think the pressure to engage in sexting comes from. Some of the responses show that the children had thought about sending both sexual messages and sexual images in this question. **Pressuring (n=43)** was the most common reason for feeling pressure. Repeated requests for images, extortion and threatening were mentioned as means of exerting pressure.

"The other person doesn't stop asking, puts on pressure saying that we can't talk anymore if I don't send something similar, extorting like that. I personally need a lot of attention and sometimes I get confused what the right kind of attention is"

"They ask for these messages by nagging until you agree. Or even threatening to do something like spreading things if you don't send them"

"They started to pressure or like tempt me, e.g. "Send it now" "I can pay"

"If you've sent nude photos before and they threaten to spread them, and call you stupid things if you don't"

One reason for the pressure to send sexual messages was **fear of consequences (n=20)** if one does not agree to send sexual messages or sexual images. These reasons were related to, for example, disappointing the other person and fear that the other person would be angry or reject them. On the other hand, children were also afraid of images spreading.

"Because I'm afraid my partner will leave me if I don't agree to send such messages"

"Even if I didn't feel like it at the moment. I wanted the other person not to be disappointed or fed up"

"E.g. being afraid that they would suddenly start to spread these photos"

"You think something will happen if you don't"

A key reason for the pressure to send sexual messages was found to be **seeking approval (n=17)**. Sexting was seen as a way of feeling accepted and loved.

"I want people to like me"

"The desire to be good enough for someone and feel accepted"

"I feel like I'll be left alone if I don't send photos."

"You don't dare to say no. Just want to be loved."

Infatuation and a **desire to please (n=11)** were also reasons why children felt pressured to engage in sexting.

"Usually, I want to, but sometimes I felt like I didn't have the energy, but I liked this person so I sent them"

"The need to please and not wanting to disappoint"

Pressure to engage in sexting also arose from the assumption of the **reciprocity of sexting (n=10)**. When the other person sent a sexual message, it was difficult not to respond with a sexual message or a sexual image.

"The other person sent one first and it wouldn't be polite not to send them back."

"I didn't want to disappoint the men/boys I was snapchatting with. I felt obliged to send photos because I had talked to them and they called me so beautiful"

Pressure to engage in sexting was also felt to arise from **social pressure and the normalisation of sexting (n=9)**. Sexting becoming more common was visible in the children’s everyday life, and the general way of talking about it made it seem that all children engaged in sexting. This also created pressure to engage in sexting themselves.

“from social media, sending messages nowadays seems normal, that everyone does it”

“Everyone talks about it and people often ask for photos and messages online”

“Others talk about it quite a lot at school, etc.”

REASONS FOR SENDING SEXUAL IMAGES

The most common reasons for sending sexual images were flirting and getting romantic attention (64%, n=279) and wanting to please the other person (57%, n=250). Of those who sent images, 46 per cent (n=201) felt that it was part of their relationship. 34 per cent (n=151) sent sexual images to seek attention and approval. Pressure or threats were the reason for 12 per cent (n=54) of the children. Only 5 per cent (n=20) said they participated in sending images because they did not understand what was going on, and most of them were younger children.

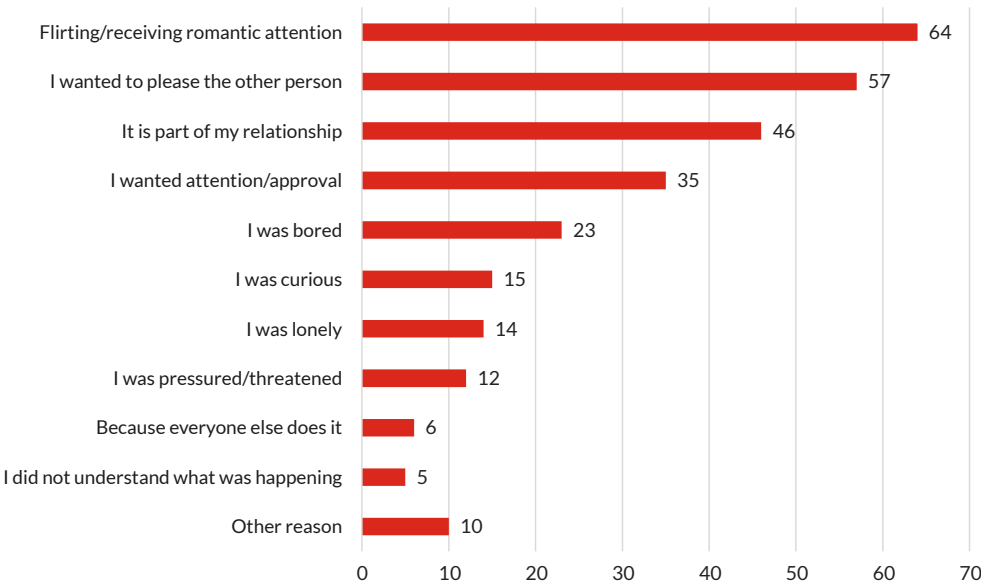


Figure 7. Reasons for sending sexual images, % (n=440).

Only less than a fifth (18%, n=80) of those who sent sexual images felt concerned or very concerned about their images being spread. On the other hand, 57 per cent (n=257) reported not being concerned at all. However, half (50%, n=224) of those who sent sexual images said they did something to protect themselves and their images. The most common ways were to make sure that the face is not shown in the image, that the image goes to the right person, and to choose the option where the image is only shown to the recipient once. Other ways included not sending images that are too revealing (wearing clothes) or using a different account to send the image or limiting the time the image is shown in the app.

Participation in sexting and sending and receiving sexual images were also examined based on background factors with cross-tabulations and logistic regressions. Those more likely to receive sexual messages and sexual images were older children and girls, as well as those who reported financial worries in their family, poor health or a health challenge, those who used substances or felt that they belonged to a minority. With regard to sending sexual messages and sexual images, the results were very similar, but belonging to a minority or the perceived state of health were not statistically significantly related to sending sexual messages or sexual images.

WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK ABOUT SEXTING?

Although sexual messages and sexual images were asked about separately, the children's thoughts were similar for both. Therefore, this section discusses the children's thoughts related to both sexual messages and sexual images and videos (n=2,395). In their responses, the children also seemed to associate unwanted sexual messages and images with sexting to some extent, which may be reflected in the fact that nearly half (40%) of the respondents had a negative attitude towards sexting. More than a quarter of the children (27%) had a positive or partially accepting attitude towards sexting. 15 per cent were neutral and 18 per cent did not know what they thought.

In their responses, many emphasised the conditions within which sexting is or is not acceptable. The children usually accepted sexting if there was mutual consent, the other person was reliable, preferably a dating partner, and the participants were of the same age and/or old enough. The fact that children engage in sexting with their friends as a joke was also highlighted in the positive attitudes.

Most commonly, a neutral attitude towards sexting was reflected in responses stating that the respondent had no opinion or no interest in the matter. On the other hand, the neutral attitude was also reflected in responses in which the children pointed out that they are not personally interested in sexting, but that others are allowed to do what they want. In the neutral responses, it was also pointed out that one's opinion depends on the situation and to whom the messages are sent.

Negative attitudes towards sexting were reflected in descriptions of it as wrong, gross, stupid, strange or distressing. These descriptions may show respondents confusing sexting for receiving unwanted messages. In addition, fear and the risks of the messages and images spreading were reflected in the responses. Some felt that sexting is not appropriate for minors or children of their own age. The children's responses clearly showed that the risks of sexting were well known. This was reflected, for example, in the conditions under which sexting was perceived as acceptable and in the fact that it was not seen as appropriate for those who are too young.

Table 1. Children's attitude towards sexting (n=2,395).

Positive & accepting (27%, n=638)

"Sex is a new and exciting thing for young people, I think it's good to be able to do these things safely and with consent"

"It's okay if it comes entirely from both parties' own will and the parties have 100% trust in each other."

"It's okay and sometimes even a very good thing, as long as both feel safe."

"I think it's okay as long as both parties are comfortable and as long as you're 100% sure that they won't be shared onward"

"It can be just fun with friends and also with partners, but it's not okay to get that kind of message from someone you don't know"

"Well, we do it as a joke. Like flirting as a joke"

"It can be good for a relationship. And it can be nice. People are pretty curious"

"If both parties give permission, it should be okay"

"Nude photos are unnecessary, but photos with a little clothes between partners are okay, but you should not send any kind of sexual photos to someone who is not even your partner"

"I think it can be a good and hot thing, if it is done in a healthy way"

"It's okay if it's for a girlfriend/ boyfriend if both are on board, but it can feel disgusting if it's someone you don't know"

Neutral (15%, n=370)

"Well, to each their own. Personally, I'm not so interested in this kind of thing, but if someone likes it, then why not."

"There's nothing wrong with it, doesn't matter, they can do what they want"

"If you want to, then go for it, but I personally wouldn't send anything"

"It depends a lot on the situation and age"

"It feels a bit unnecessary and risky, but I don't care so much about it"

"I say that you can do it at your own risk, but I'll never do it"

"I don't do that, so I don't really have an opinion"

Negative (40%, n=955)

"It's pretty disgusting because you send inappropriate pictures to others and then disrespect yourself and others"

"I think it's stupid and not appropriate. Young people may not understand boundaries under pressure."

"I don't think it's a terribly good thing, since I can't come up with any good things about it"

"I think it's really risky because the pictures can be spread or used for extortion, for example, if they don't get what they want"

"People send things to strangers too much because anyone can lie about their age"

"It's not nice, it's not suitable for someone my age"

"It's not wise because we're minors."

"I don't like it. You never know who gets them and there's a huge risk of them spreading further."

"Unnecessary, disgusting"

"It's abnormal and disgusting and not okay"

"if one of them does it without permission from the other, it's not okay"

"If someone sent something to me, I would block them and tell an adult, since it's not normal"

"I think it's stupid and bad for people to do this"

"It shouldn't be as common as it is."

4.3 Online sexual abuse by a peer

This report examines online sexual abuse between peers from a **limited perspective**: children were asked about receiving unwanted sexual messages and sexual images, sharing images without consent, extortion by threatening to spread images and making an image using a phone, computer or artificial intelligence.

SEXUAL ABUSE BY A PEER

Receiving unwanted sexual messages and sexual images was the most common form of sexual abuse by a peer experienced among children. More than half (58%, n=656) of those who received sexual messages reported receiving unwanted messages. In the total data, this represented 16 per cent of all children who responded. 65 per cent (n=572) of all children who received sexual images or videos reported receiving unwanted sexual images or videos. In the total data, 14 per cent had received unwanted images. Receiving unwanted sexual messages and sexual images was most common among girls. Of girls who received sexual images, 76 per cent (n=470) reported receiving unwanted images, compared to 48 per cent (n=10) of children of other gender and 32 per cent (n=58) of boys. Younger children reported receiving unwanted sexual messages and sexual images slightly more frequently: for example, 79 per cent (n=27) of 12-year-olds and 72 per cent (n=73) of 13-year-olds who received images reported receiving unwanted images, while the corresponding proportion of 17-year-olds was 60 per cent (n=111).

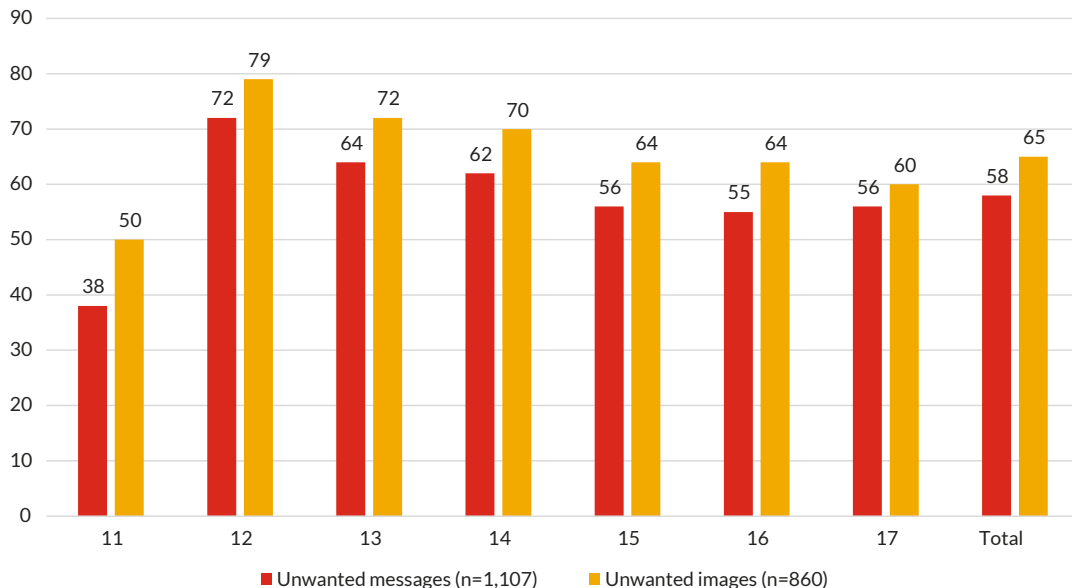


Figure 8. Age and the proportion of children who have received unwanted sexual messages and sexual images, of those who received sexual messages and sexual images, %.

Other online sexual abuse by a peer appeared to be rare overall. Approximately 3 per cent reported that a peer showed or shared a sexual image of the child without permission (n=104) or that a peer extorted them with spreading an image (n=111). Being the target of a sexual image that was made

with artificial intelligence or otherwise edited was even more rare, and only 2 per cent (n=79) of children reported this. All the above-mentioned question options were combined into one indicator measuring experienced sexual abuse by peers. **A total of 21 per cent (n=853) of the children reported experiencing sexual abuse online by a peer.** Five per cent (n=185) of the children reported that they had witnessed a peer taking a sexual image of another child.

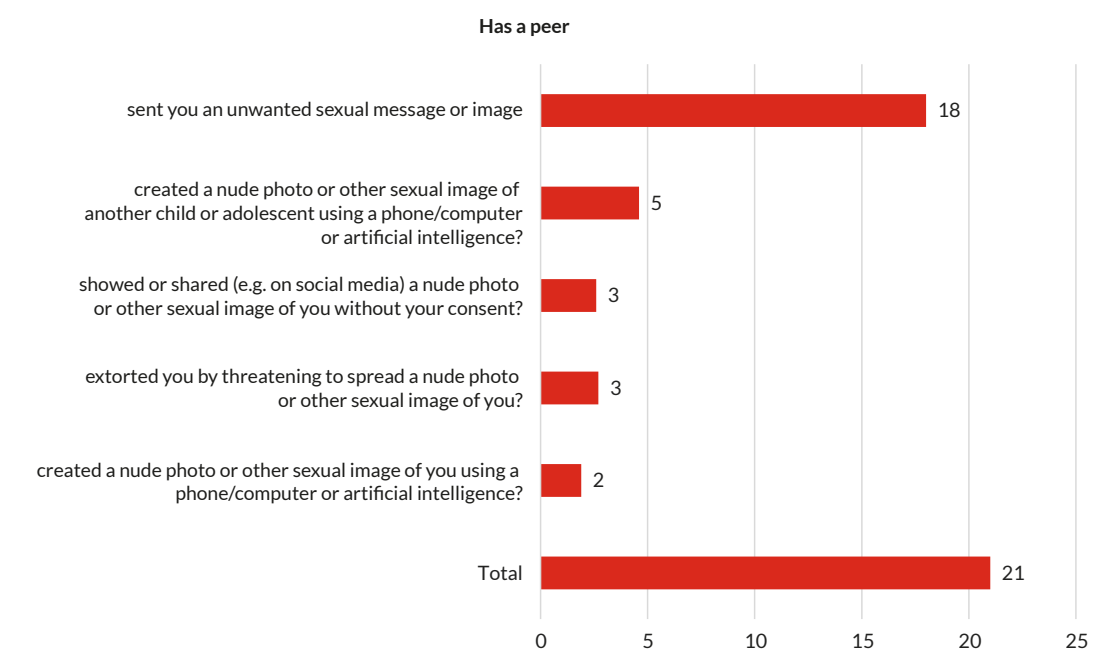


Figure 9. Experiences of online sexual abuse by a peer, % (n=4,106).

A CHILD SEXUALLY ABUSING A PEER

Of the children, 3 per cent (n=126) said that they themselves had shown or shared a sexual image of another child with someone without consent. One per cent of children reported extorting a peer with sexual images (n=39) or creating images with artificial intelligence (n=47). **With these question options combined, it appeared that 4 per cent (n=145) of the children in the total dataset had carried out sexual abuse online.**

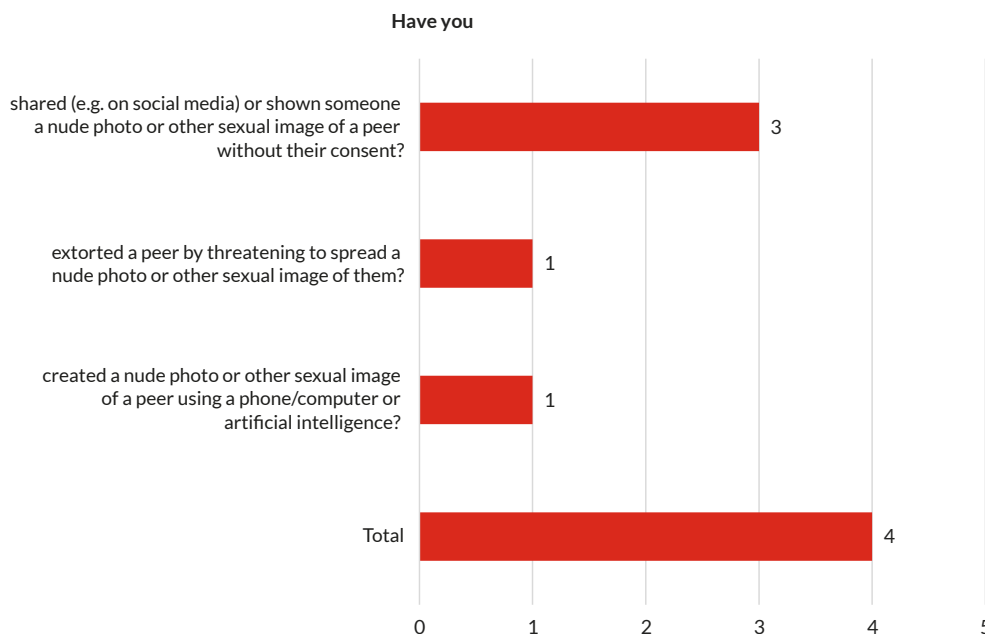


Figure 10. Children who have engaged in online sexual abuse towards a peer, % (n=4,106).

Both experiencing sexual abuse and carrying out it online between peers was slightly more common among older children. 37 per cent (n=139) of the 17-year-olds and 8 per cent (n=46) of the 12-year-olds reported having experienced sexual abuse by another child. Girls and those of other gender reported having both experienced sexual abuse by other children and committed it themselves slightly more often than boys, but the differences were not statistically significant with regard to committing sexual abuse.

Experiencing and carrying out sexual abuse online among children seem to be somewhat overlapping phenomena. Of the children who had experienced sexual abuse by a peer, 11 per cent (n=97) also reported that they themselves had carried out sexual abuse towards another child. Of those who had not experienced sexual abuse themselves, only 2 per cent (n=48) reported having carried out sexual abuse. Of the children who reported having carried out sexual abuse themselves, 67 per cent (n=97) had also experienced sexual abuse by a peer. 19 per cent (n=752) of those who did not report having carried out sexual abuse themselves had experienced sexual abuse.

When reviewing the risk factors of sexual abuse between peers using a logistic regression analysis, the family's ongoing financial worries increased the risk of experiencing sexual abuse by a peer compared to those who did not have financial worries in their family. Belonging to a minority and health-related challenges also increased the risk. The risk of experiences of sexual abuse between peers was higher among those who used substances compared to those who did not. Substance use also appeared to increase the risk of carrying out sexual abuse online. Living with one parent alter-

nately every other week seemed to increase the risk of carrying out abuse compared to those who primarily live with both parents. No other risk factors for carrying out sexual abuse were identified.

4.4 Online sexual abuse by an adult

The children were asked whether an adult or a person at least five years older than them had contacted them online during the last year. Of the children, 31 per cent (n=1,272) answered yes. Of the children who had been contacted by an adult online, 67 per cent said they had experienced sexual abuse online by an adult.

Less than one fifth (19%, n=776) of all children said they received a sexual message from an adult online, and 17 per cent (n=679) reported than an adult sent them a sexual image during the last year. A sixth of all children (16%, n=647) said that an adult had asked them for a sexual image online during the past year. Of the children, 14 per cent (n=560) said that an adult had asked them to record a video of themselves. **A total of 21 per cent (n=853) of all children who responded to the survey had experienced the above-mentioned forms of sexual abuse online by an adult.**

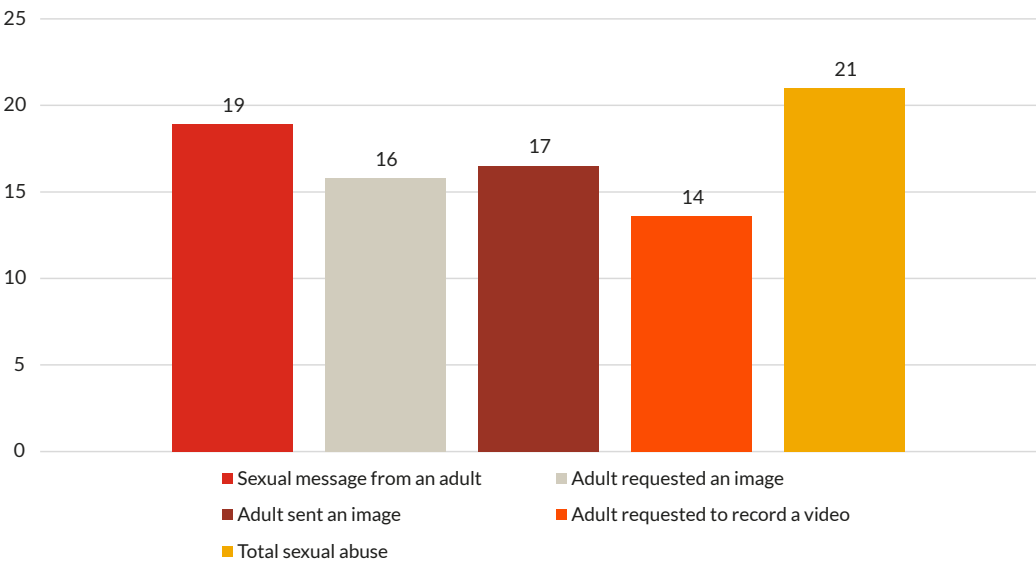


Figure 11. Online sexual abuse by adults; all children who participated in the survey, % (n=4,106).

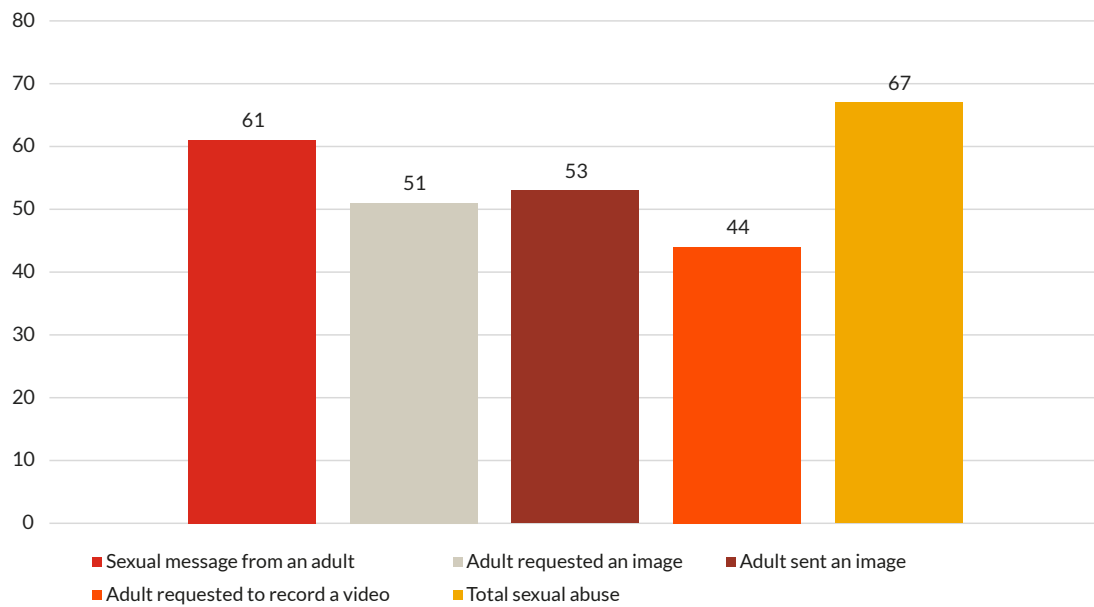


Figure 12. Online sexual abuse by adults: children who have been contacted online by an adult, % (n=1,272).

HOW OFTEN DO CHILDREN EXPERIENCE SEXUAL ABUSE BY AN ADULT ONLINE?

Of the children who reported different experiences of sexual abuse by adults, 5–6 per cent reported that this happened daily and 10–12 per cent weekly during the last year. A little less than a third (28–30%) had experienced sexual abuse at least a few times a month and 50–55 per cent a few times a year.

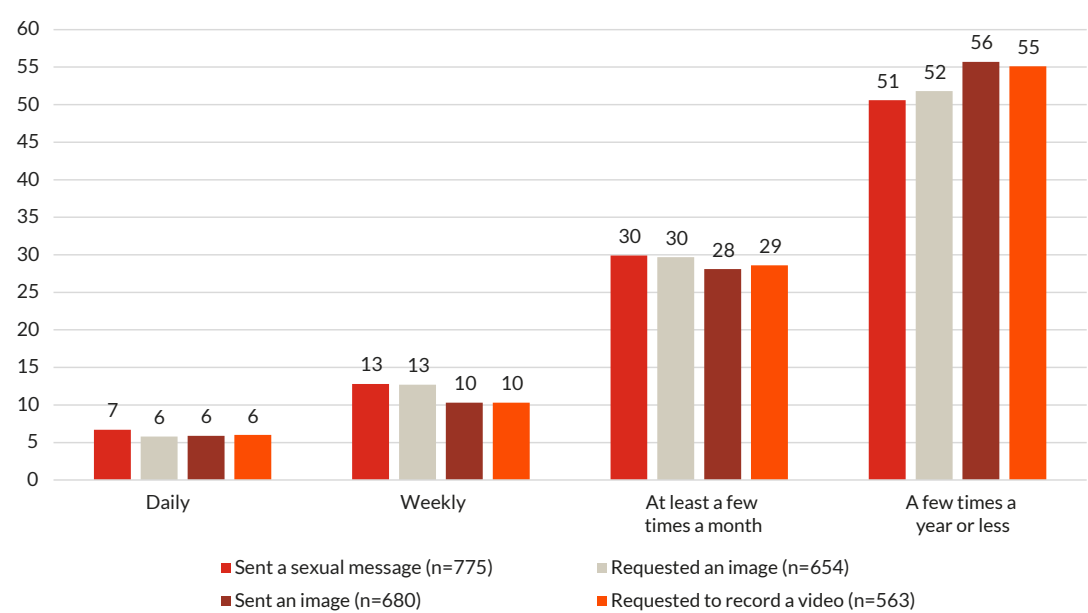


Figure 13. Prevalence of sexual abuse by an adult among children who have experienced sexual abuse, %.

Experiences of sexual abuse by an adult during the last year were significantly more common in older age groups. 41 per cent (n=152) of 17-year-old children reported experiencing sexual abuse by an adult, while the corresponding proportion of 12-year-olds was 8 per cent (n=47).

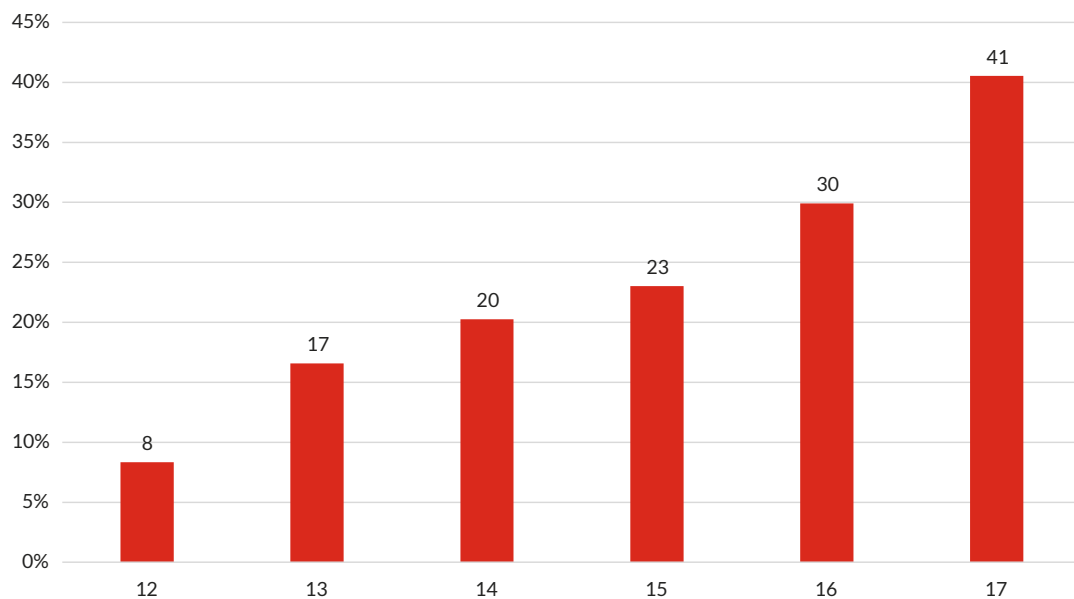


Figure 14. Experiences of sexual abuse by an adult by age, % (n=3,977).

Experiences of sexual abuse by an adult were highlighted among girls. One third of them (33%, n=666) reported that they had experienced sexual abuse by an adult online. The corresponding proportion of children of other gender was approximately one fifth (20%, n=21) and of boys, eight per cent (n=122).

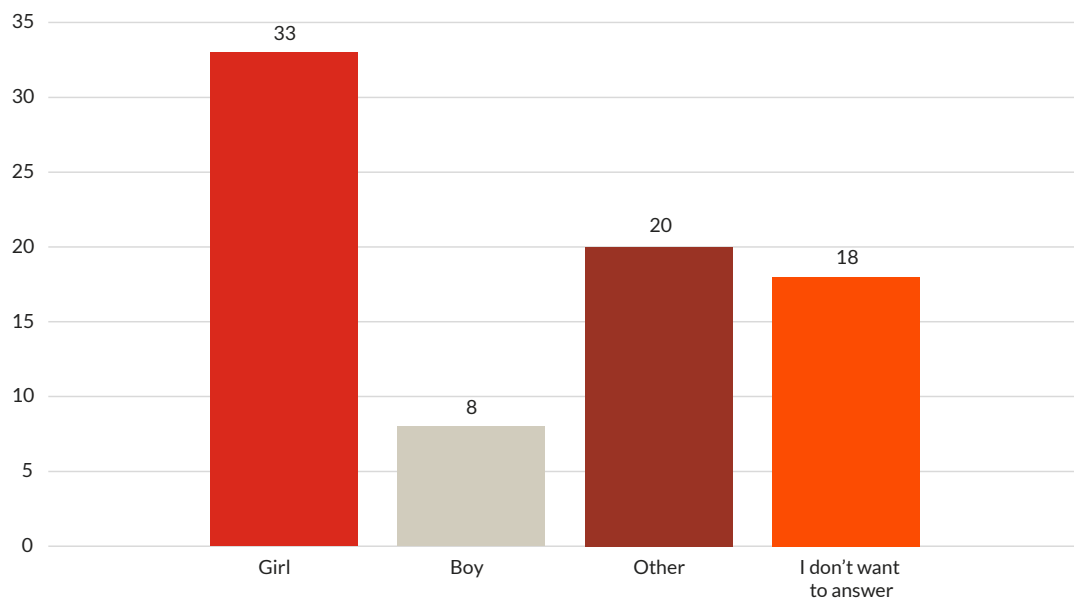


Figure 15. Experiences of sexual abuse by an adult by gender, % (n=3,974).

RECEIVING A REWARD IN EXCHANGE FOR SEXUAL ACTS

The children were asked whether an adult had offered a reward, such as money, gifts, game credits or substances, in exchange for sexual acts. A quarter (25%, n=318) answered yes. A little less than a sixth (14%, n=174) reported that an adult extorted them to make them comply with their requests. Of the total data, rewards were offered to 8 per cent of the children, and 4 per cent of all children experienced extortion.

“Several older men have offered me €50–100 for sex, that’s one example”

An adult offered a reward more often to 15–17-year-old children and girls. In terms of extortion, the differences between age groups were not as clear. Those of other gender were highlighted in the experiences of extortion. More than one fifth (23%, n=9) of children of other gender reported that an adult had extorted them online regarding sexual images, while the corresponding proportion of girls was 15 per cent (n=131) and seven per cent of boys (n=19).

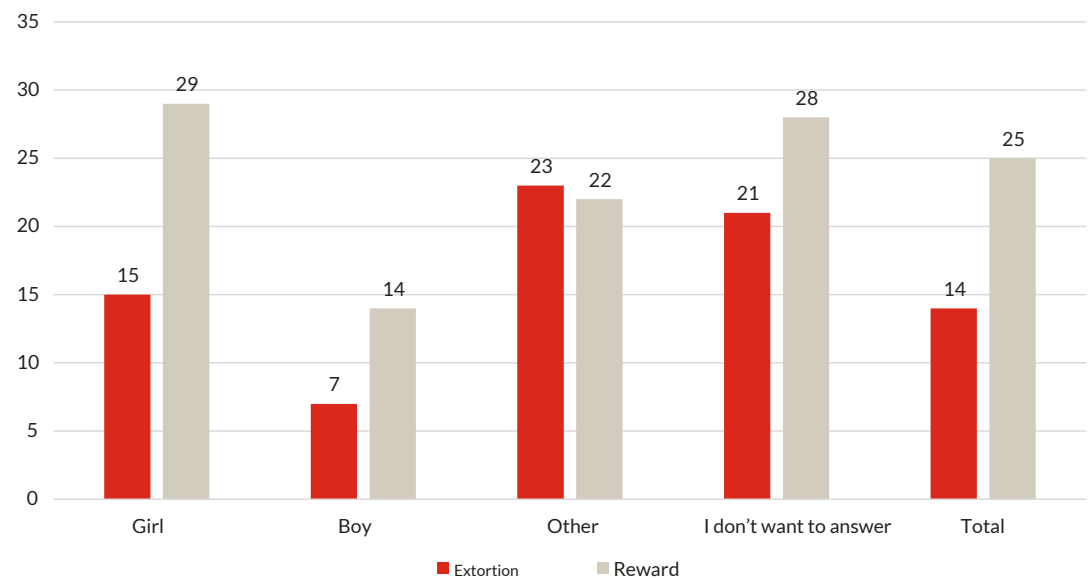


Figure 16. Of those who received messages online from an adult, those who reported being offered a reward or extorted by gender, % (n=1,255).

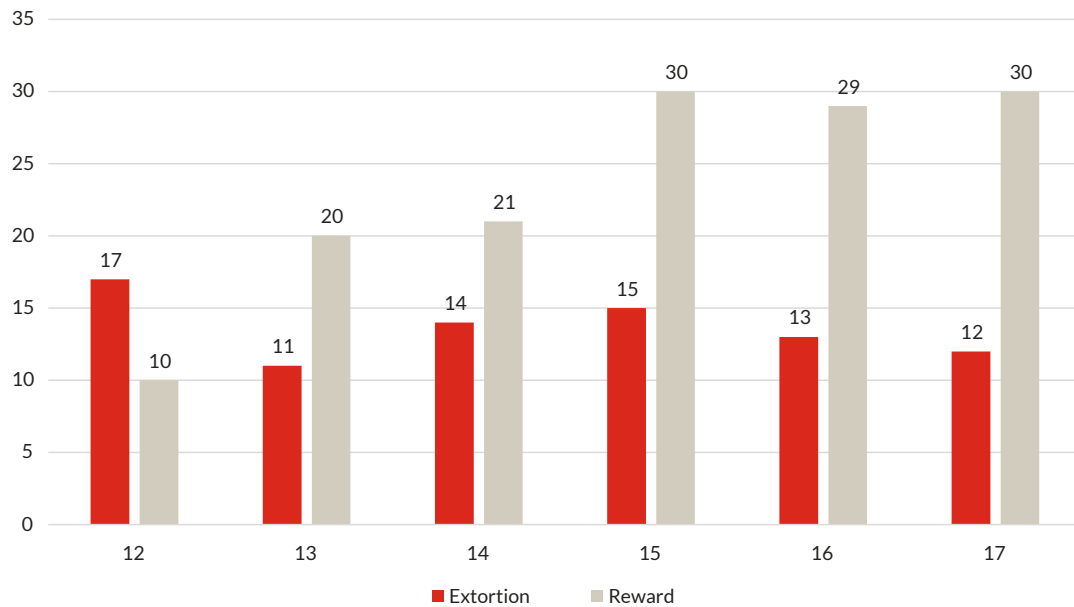


Figure 17. Of those who received messages online from an adult, those who reported being offered a reward or extorted by age, % (n=1,219).

PROGRESSION OF CONVERSATIONS WITH AN ADULT

The report also examined the reasons why the adolescents had continued to talk to the adult. The most common reasons for continuing the discussion were boredom (36%, n=309), curiosity (22%, n=186) and the desire for attention or approval (21%, n=182).

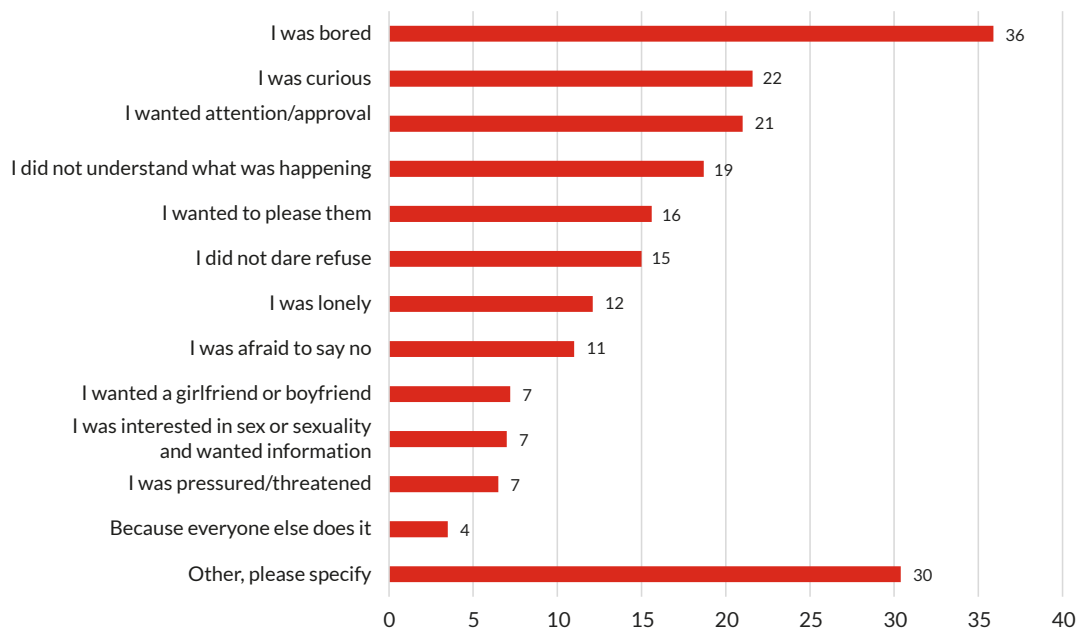


Figure 18. Reasons for continuing the conversation with an adult, % (n=861).

Many children felt that the reason for continuing the conversation was something other than the options given. Approximately one third (31%, n=235) of the children said that the reason was something else, and one fifth (22%, n=52) of them had not understood the question, saying that the discussion did not continue or that they were not contacted. Another reason was that the conversation was not sexual or that the person was a friend (17%, n=39). Here, adults as gaming friends or other acquaintances or relatives who did not have a sexual intention in their communications were highlighted.

"I talked to someone who was about 20 years old when we played a video game together, this person didn't talk to me in any sexual sense"

"In the game, I've met nice people who are adults and played with them"

"At no point was it about anything sexual, but purely about shared interests"

Another common reason was that **they continued messaging as a joke** and were having fun at the expense of the person sending the messages (17%, n=41).

"I waste their time and it's fun to see them try to get pictures from me"

"It was fun"

On the other hand, the aim was to **hold the adult accountable** (6%, n=15).

"I condemned him and told him to stop doing this in the future"

"So that I could get evidence when I file a report with the police"

"I wanted to catch a paedophile and call the police"

The conversation could also be continued because they **did not know what was going on when the conversation started** (8%, n=18). For example, when the conversation began, the child did not know the age of the other person or that the conversation would become sexual. In some cases, messaging continued because they felt **pressured or received a reward for continuing messaging** (5%, n=12). In a few cases (3%, n=6), the child expressed that interest was the reason for continuing to communicate. In these cases, the child reported an interest in slightly older men.

More than half (51%, n=481) of children who received sexual messages from an adult reported that the conversation became sexual in less than an hour. For 13 per cent (n=124) of children, the conversation became sexual within a few hours. A little less than a fifth (19%, n=176) said that the messaging became sexual in some other amount of time. Most often, these responses reported that the discussion became sexual immediately or within a couple of minutes, or that it was not an actual sexual discussion.

"Almost right away or then the very first thing they say is like "will you send nude photos"'"

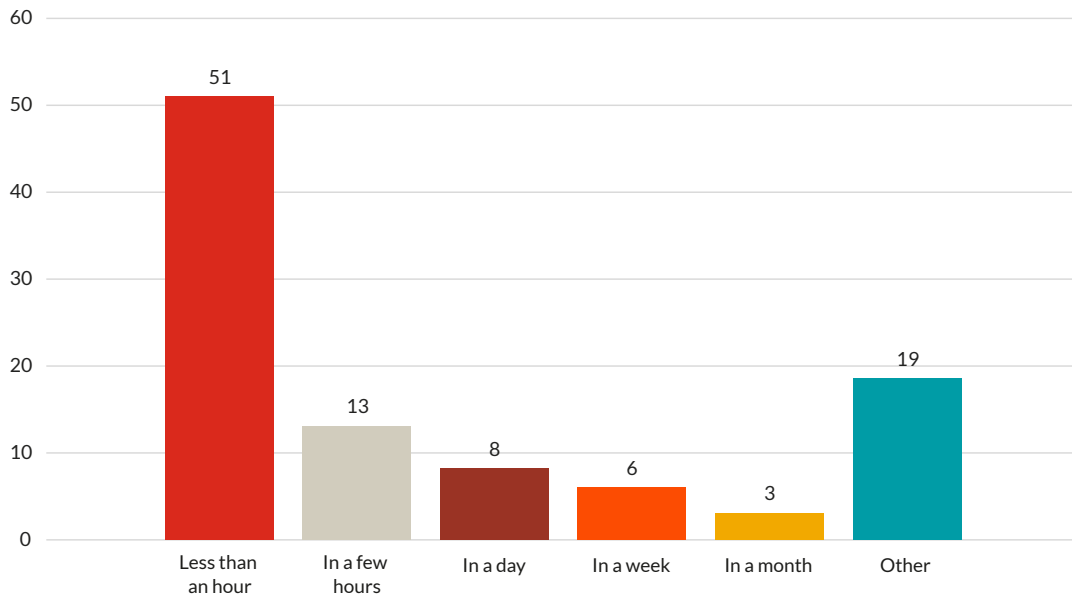


Figure 19. Time in which the conversation became sexual, % (n=944).

One in ten (10%, n=123) of the children who had been contacted online by an adult said that the contact led to a meeting. In the total data, this corresponded to 3 per cent. Leading to meetings was more common in older age groups. Of the 17-year-olds, 15 per cent (n=28) said they met face-to-face with an adult who they had met online, while the corresponding proportion of 12-year-olds was 9 per cent (n=8). Compared to girls (8%, n=66) and boys (13%, n=36), messaging with adults led to face-to-face meetings more often among children of other gender (24%, n=9).

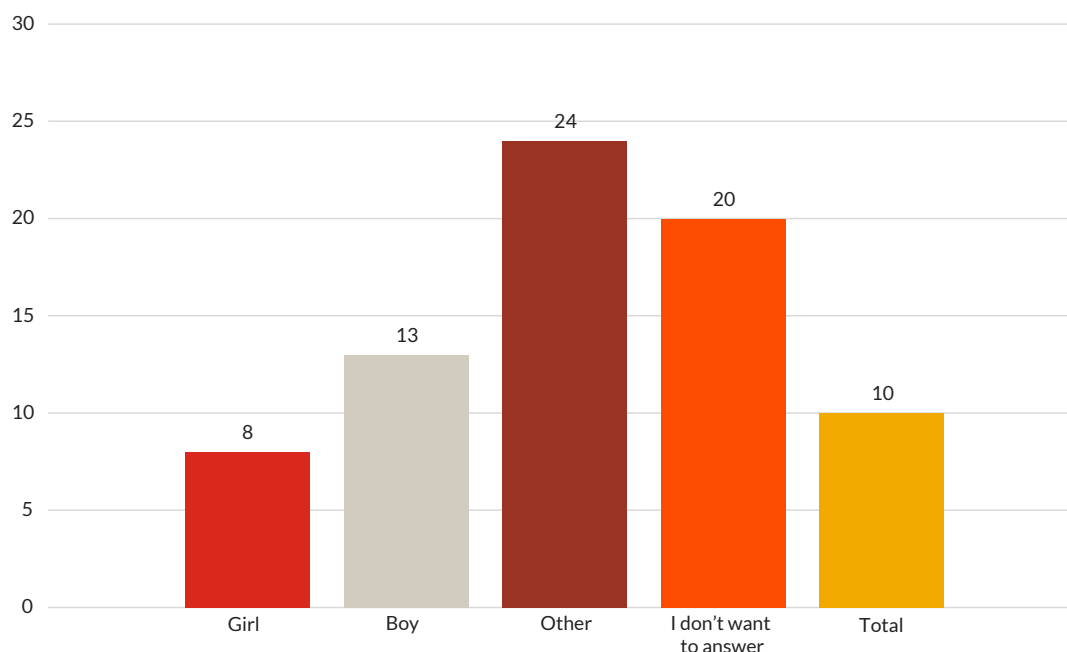


Figure 20. Adult contacts leading to a meeting by gender, % (n=1,212).

The children were also asked what happened during the meeting with an adult. A large part of the meetings mainly consisted of hanging out without any sexual incidents. The meetings could be, for example, hanging out in a larger group, participating in an event together or accidentally encountering the person. However, some reported that they experienced either being pressured into sex or sexual abuse during the meeting. Some reported having had sex or other sexual activity that, based on the descriptions, could be assumed to have taken place with a mutual understanding.

The risk of sexual abuse by adults was higher among those who reported health-related challenges and poor health compared to those who felt their health is good or who did not report health-related challenges. In addition, alcohol use increased the risk of experiencing sexual abuse by an adult online. Girls are at greater risk of being victims of sexual abuse. Children who had experiences of participating in sexting or of sexual abuse between peers either as the one initiating it or as the victim were at greater risk of also being subjected to sexual abuse by an adult online.

4.5 Disclosing experiences of sexual abuse

A quarter (26%, n=1,068) of the children said they had talked about sexting or sharing sexual images with a safe adult. More than half (61%, n=464) of children who had experienced sexual abuse by an adult online had not told anyone about their experience. However, well over a third (39%, n=362) told someone about their experience. The children primarily (72%, n=278) told a friend about their experience and only a little less than a third (27%, n=105) told their mothers. 8 per cent (n=32) of children reported it to school staff and 10 per cent (n=40) to the police.

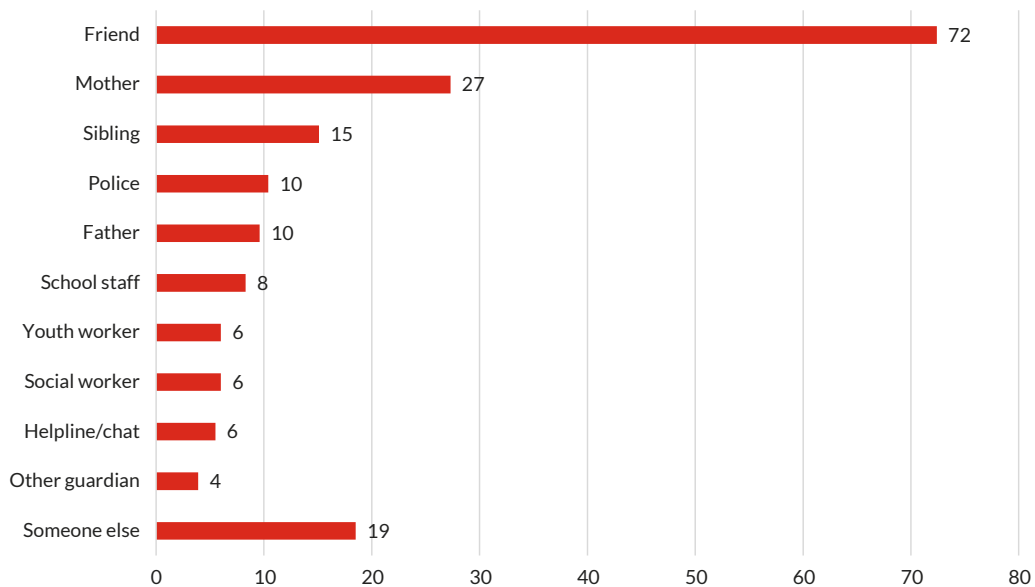


Figure 21. Who the child tells about the abuse they have experienced, % (n=384)

The most common reason why the children told someone was **some unpleasant feeling** (26%, n=68), such as anxiety, fear, nervousness, a strange feeling or feeling bad.

"I have to share such a gross and traumatic thing."

"Because it's disgusting it feels better when a friend knows what's going on"

"I couldn't keep it in my head. It made me so anxious"

"couldn't manage the anxiety on my own"

"I felt bad"

The second most common reasons for telling someone were related to **openness and the desire to share one's own experience** (12%, n=31).

"I tell my friends everything"

"I talk openly about what is happening in my life"

"I tell my mum and dad everything, so I wasn't ashamed right away"

Reasons emphasizing friendships for disclosure also included the experience emerging in shared conversations or trust in friends. (10%, n=25).

"Usually, when talking to friends about "deeper" things, these things come up."

"I talked to my friends and boyfriend about how disgusting and common it is to get unwanted pictures, messages and propositions from adult men."

"Friends are usually told these things if you don't feel it's bad enough to tell an adult about it"

"It was right after health class where we talked about these things and other friends also shared their own experiences"

One of the key reasons behind telling someone was that **the children wanted to laugh about what had happened together with friends** (11%, n=28).

"Content for my friends and some laughs"

"purely for fun, I don't always take those things seriously, I just block them after I've annoyed them enough"

In addition to the aforementioned, in some cases the reason for telling someone was to **warn others or to ensure safety** (7%, n=19).

"I tell immediately if someone harasses me online or offline. I try to keep myself safe and also share information with friends that this kind of risk exists online."

"I wanted to share the information with a friend so that they could avoid the same person"

"Because my idea was to get evidence of this person's behaviour so that they wouldn't repeat their actions with other young people."

The reasons why the children did not tell anyone about their experiences were also surveyed with an open-ended question (n=392). The majority of the children (38%, n=150) did not tell anyone **because they did not feel it necessary to tell, did not feel the situation was serious enough or simply did not want to tell.**

"Because it's not a big deal for me and doesn't bother me at all"

"I didn't feel it necessary because I didn't feel bad about it. It was a quick conversation that I knew to end quickly."

"It didn't affect my life so I'd put in the effort for it. I've just checked what they send as a joke"

"It wasn't so serious that some random old guy just asks me to send pictures, so I don't think there's a need to tell someone when it doesn't even bother me. But of course if it had been something more serious, I would have told someone."

"it doesn't bother me"

"I wanted to keep it to myself"

"Didn't need to"

The second most common reason for not telling anyone was that the child did **not dare to tell** (24%, n=93). Some of the responses highlighted one's own involvement and the resulting shame. There was also a fear of consequences or reactions if they told someone, for which reason they never did.

"I was embarrassed, afraid, ashamed. I didn't want everyone to think how stupid I was for sending pictures like that?"

"I didn't dare to say anything because I knew it was wrong and I knew my parents would be angry"

"I don't dare because I'm not sure that's what it was and since I sent them myself too, but I felt forced and was afraid to refuse."

"I was ashamed. I thought it wasn't such a big deal. I thought that because I was interested even though I knew what the other person was trying to do, that I don't have the right to complain about it. I was afraid I misunderstood everything and the adult was just trying to be nice"

"I was afraid that social media would be taken away from me."

"I was scared, I didn't know what to do"

"I was scared"

"didn't dare"

"Embarrassing"

The children also did not tell anyone because they **had not experienced such situations**, or they were not sexual in nature, or because nothing actually "happened in the end" (17%, n=66).

A little less than ten per cent (8%, n=30) responded that they **did not know why they did not tell anyone**. Some of the responses highlighted blocking as an alternative to telling (4%, n=17).

"I've blocked them all as soon as I get a photo or message that's a little flirty."

"I blocked the person and let it be because I didn't want to make it into a thing"

"it didn't feel necessary because there's something called blocking"

A small proportion of the respondents (3%, n=10) said that **positive feelings** were the reason why they did not share their experiences.

"because I like to be with this person and why would I tell"

"Because I did it for fun. And it didn't bother me since I just started talking with them myself"

"I don't want to talk about it because I don't mind the pictures and messages, I like them"

The remaining responses showed that they did **not feel that telling someone would help, felt that they could not tell anyone or did not understand what had happened** (5%, n=19). For example, the children said they did not know who they would have told or did not understand that it was grooming.

"I didn't know who to turn to, and I didn't necessarily feel a discussion was needed because I didn't share any pictures myself"

"Because at the time I thought it was okay, even though I knew it wasn't. I didn't care about the age difference."

"I don't have any close adults to tell or anyone because I don't dare to be the one to start the conversation."

"no safe adults, I don't trust and don't want to talk to people"

4.6 Sexual abuse online as described by children

At the end of the survey, the children were asked if there was anything else they would like to share relating to the survey's topics. In the section below, we have picked out some key highlights from the children. Most are descriptions of what online sexual abuse usually is like or what the phenomenon looks like in their eyes. The descriptions written by the children bring up the fact that there are different online profiles or online groups focusing on exchanging images, where exchanging images is common even though there are also children in the groups. In addition to groups, accepting a contact or friend request exposes children to the risk of grooming and sexual abuse. Adults also approach children with fake profiles and sometimes under the guise of play (truth or dare). Adults also offer children rewards in exchange for sexual acts.

"Usually, contacts come unexpectedly and you might be added to an ig or snap group where nude photos are spread and pornographic content is shared. Sometimes there are even people under the age of 12 in the group who themselves participate in spreading photos. Also in these situations, when an older person contacts a minor, the minor may play with it or hope that the older person sends a nude photo that can be spread. In other words, young people don't take the matter seriously but may pretend to "flirt" with an older person."

"Usually these have happened on snapchat and someone has added you and started chatting and it may have taken hours or days for them to start talking sexually and asking things, and also some try to get you to play a truth or dare game that usually ends with some sexual questions or dares"

"there are communities where young people can meet adults they want to form sexual relationships with."

"Snapchat has so many fake profiles that pretend to be teens but are really adults. And there are hundreds of exchange profiles"

"They often start with friendly messages, but they quickly get sexual and play something like truth or dare, and suddenly they start asking something like whether you've had sex or like porn (even though you've clearly told them that you're a teenager, for example) and then they go on to send photos of themselves (often nude) and then also ask you to send some back"

"Many have gone straight to the point and asked for nudes, and when I've answered I don't send them to strangers and I have a boyfriend, they usually call me things like whore, slut, fat, small-breasted, etc., even though they don't even know what I look like"

"I was groomed when I was about [...] years old[...]. I was doing really badly at the time, and I got attention, praise and approval from that person. At first, we talked about normal topics, [...]. From there the questions escalated, and eventually this person got me to send nude photos. The questions were not direct pressure, but they said "you don't have to, but I would be happy". I wanted to please others back then."

"people my age ask if I want to exchange nude photos and older people send questions online about if I want money for doing something sexual with them"

"I have noticed that the older I get, the less sexual conversations and pictures I get especially from people older than me, which is very worrying"

"this grooming is something I would go quite far to stop, I think it's terrible if it happens in reality, I think people really need to take care of it before it gets too much"

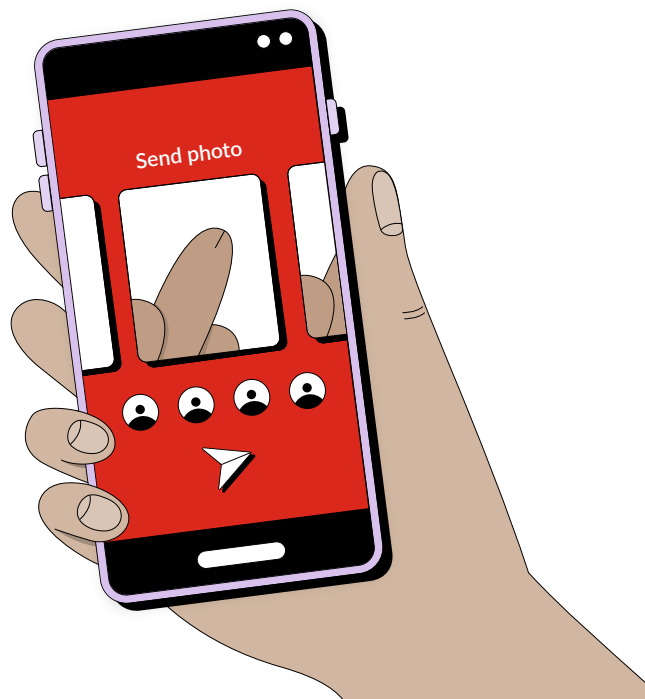
"A man who tried to contact me several times a year since I was [...] who tried to get together with me against my will. He was 18 when he started, has recently stopped."

Some of the children brought up what adults should do about the matter in their descriptions. For example, the children wished that they could be taught at school how to act in these situations. In addition, they hoped that children who are too young would not be given access to phones and the internet or that it would be more supervised or restricted.

"I think it would be necessary to teach more about sexual harassment in schools, as many young people do not understand that, for example, commenting about the shape of another's body (e.g. the youth slang word "gyat", which means a large butt) is sexual harassment and you see it every day."

"That young children shouldn't be given a phone that can get anywhere on the internet, my own experience was totally shitty"

"The phones of people under the age of 13 should have a family link and some social media, such as snapchat and tiktok, should be deleted. I've seen K18 videos and lives on TikTok. And I've been added by bots or adults on snapchat and they tried to get nude photos. Bots try to get you to click on virus links by sending nude photos. These bot messages are automatic and they send messages every 1 minute."



5 DISCUSSION

CHILDREN ARE CAUTIOUS ABOUT SEXTING: “IT’S OKAY IF BOTH THINK IT’S OKAY”

Some children participate in sexting with consent, but also receive unwanted messages. According to the results, more than a quarter of the children had received sexual messages from a peer and 15 per cent had sent them to a peer. Receiving and sending sexual messages was more common than sexual images. Sexting was more common among older children. Girls and children of other gender receive sexual messages most often, while children of other gender send them more often than girls and boys. The results on the prevalence of sexting are very similar to previous international studies (Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2022).

Most of the time, sexual messages and especially sexual images were sent to dating partners. A quarter of those who sent sexual messages sent them to their friends, who could also, for example, be people they had a crush on. Seeking romantic attention, wanting to please the other person, and sending images as part of a relationship were the most common reasons why children sent sexual images to their peers. Similar reasons behind sexting are also highlighted in previous studies (Cooper et al., 2016; Gargano et al., 2022).

The fact that children mostly sent sexual messages and sexual images to people they felt they trusted may help explain why more than half (57%) of children who sent images were not at all concerned about the spreading of their images. However, half of the children who sent images reported that they had done something to protect themselves. In other words, a large proportion of the children recognise the risks associated with sexting and know what to do. However, it is worth noting that a quarter of the children who sent sexual images sent them to people they had met online and up to a fifth sent them to people they did not know at all. According to previous research, messaging with

strangers increases the risk of experiencing sexual abuse online (Doyle et al., 2021).

It should also be noted that more than half (55%) of the children who had received sexual images from their peers reported having received images from unknown people. In addition, it was very common to receive unwanted images: 65 per cent of the children who received sexual images had received them. This may indicate that the unwanted sexual images come specifically from unknown people, who may also be adults. Based on previous data (Save the Children, 2021) and the children's descriptions, it is known that adults who contact children online may present themselves as the children's peers. Therefore, it is likely that the child has not always been able to distinguish whether the sender of unwanted sexual images is an adult or a peer. Regarding unwanted sexual images, it was also concerning that receiving them was more common among younger age groups. This highlights the importance of media and sexual education. Children should be taught critical media literacy skills and how to strengthen and protect their own boundaries in an online environment at an early age.

Children are cautious about sexting and, in their descriptions, they highlighted related risks, such as the spreading of images and reputational damage. According to the results, up to 40 per cent of the children had a negative attitude towards sexting. Sexting was considered acceptable if there was mutual consent, the parties were old enough and of the same age and trusted each other; in this case, the descriptions of sexting could be very positive. Some of the children accepted sexting for others, but did not want to participate in it themselves. The attitude towards sending sexual images and videos was more cautious than towards text-based sexting. The children's negative attitude towards sexting may be explained by the fact that not all of the children distinguish between unwanted messages and consensual sexting. Especially younger children may not fully understand the difference between consensual sexting and sexual abuse, as experiences of consensual sexting only become more common with age, whereas receiving unwanted messages is more common among younger children. The themes describing the attitudes towards sexting corresponded well to themes highlighted in the study by Burén et al. (2022).

SEXUAL ABUSE ONLINE IS COMMON – TERRIBLY DISTRESSING AND EVERYDAY

21 per cent of all children who responded to the survey had experienced sexual abuse online by their peers. The sexual abuse mainly involved receiving unwanted sexual messages and sexual images. 5 per cent of children reported experiences of sexual extortion with sexual images and of those images being shared further. The result is in line with previous research (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022). It should also be noted that this report focused only on receiving unwanted sexual messages and sexual images, sharing them, extortion using them and making images with AI. These do not describe all online sexual abuse between peers. It is also worth noting that the children did not always know the age of the person messaging them, so experiences of sexual abuse by an adult and by a peer may have been partially mixed up.

As in previous research evidence (Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019; Doyle et al., 2021), sexting appeared to be a risk factor for sexual abuse both between peers and by adults. Sexting could be seen to increase the risk of both experiencing and perpetrating sexual abuse. In addition, it seems that in sexual abuse between peers, experiencing and committing sexual abuse were partially overlapping phenomena in general. This means that, to some extent, the same children end up both as victims and as those who carry out abuse online. This should be taken into account when planning preventive and therapeutic measures.

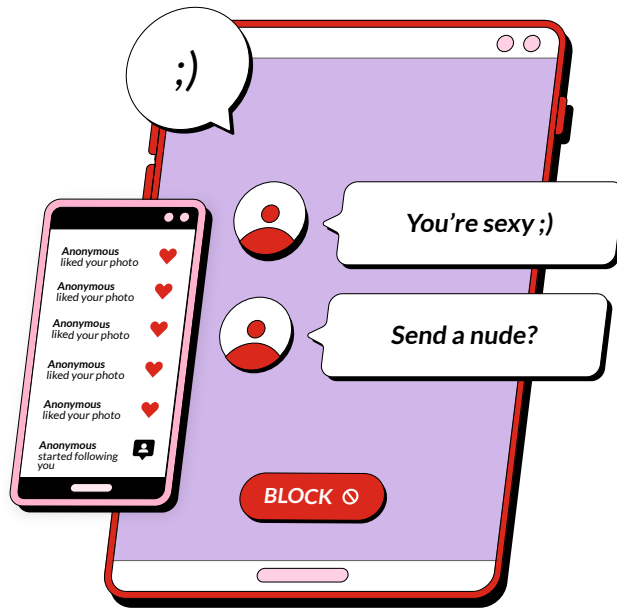
Similar to sexual abuse by peers, one fifth (21%) of all the children reported sexual abuse by adults online, which is higher than the international level (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Fin-

kelhor et al., 2022). One third (31%) of the children had been contacted online by an adult or a person at least five years older than them. Of the children contacted, 67 per cent had experienced sexual abuse by an adult. The most common (61%) experiences were receiving sexual messages. Experiences of sexual abuse were most common among girls and older children. The results are in line with a previous report (Save the Children, 2021). Compared to the previous report (Save the Children 2021), this report reported less of both contacts from adults and sexual abuse. This may be partly due to the fact that the group of respondents in the previous report was more selective, as the majority (71%) of respondents were girls and the majority (73%) of respondents took the survey via social media.

The children seemed to recognise the approach attempts of adults online fairly well. The children reported that conversations with an adult usually became sexual immediately or at least within an hour of the start of the conversation. It was common for the children to end the conversation and/or block the person in question when the conversation became sexual. Blocking was even seen as an alternative solution to telling others about their experiences. However, the children brought up in their responses that it is fun to joke at the expense of an adult who sends sexual messages and that they want adults to get caught for messaging children. This may lead to the children themselves trying to solicit such messages themselves, putting themselves at risk.

The children rarely told someone else about their experiences of sexual abuse. According to the results, more than half (61%) of the children who experienced sexual abuse online did not tell anyone about their experiences. This result differs from previous research, according to which most children told someone about the sexual abuse they experienced online (Save the Children, 2021; Mielityinen et al., 2023). It is concerning that most children who have experienced sexual abuse do not tell anyone about their experiences. The most significant reasons for not telling were that the child did not feel it necessary to tell or did not dare to tell. Based on these results, sexual abuse seems to be increasingly common and everyday among children, and it is not seen as important to tell someone about it. This is also indicated by the fact that the children continued to talk to the adult because they were bored. Based on the children's descriptions, it is possible that for some children, talking to unfamiliar adults may be a form of entertainment and they take it lightly. On the other hand, sexual abuse by an adult was a very harmful experience for some of the children, causing strong emotions and distress, which was reflected, for example, in the reasons why the child told someone about their experience. The fact that sexual abuse is becoming everyday is extremely worrying.

Finally, the children were asked an open-ended question about their thoughts on the topics of the survey. The children's responses highlighted that they want to warn their peers about people who perpetrate sexual abuse, they want to protect younger children from experiences of sexual abuse and that online sexual abuse by adults must be stopped. Based on the responses, it can be observed that children recognise and know quite a lot about the phenomena discussed in the report. Children have a lot of knowledge and they also have the skills to protect themselves. However, the skills to protect oneself need to be strengthened even further because, as this report shows, too many children experience sexual abuse online. The responsibility for the safety of children lies with adults, not with children. Even a single child's experience of sexual abuse is too much.



6 CONCLUSIONS

- » The majority of children do not engage in sexting. Children who do engage in sexting are cautious about it.
- » Children most often send sexual messages and sexual images to their dating partner, but they most often receive these messages and images from unknown people. It is likely that some of the unknown people are adults who pretend to be their peers, and it can be very difficult for children to recognise this.
- » Receiving unwanted sexual messages and sexual images is common, especially among younger children.
- » The boundary between consensual sexting and sexual abuse is not always clear to children.
- » Participating in sexting increases the risk of both experiencing and engaging in sexual abuse.
- » Sexual abuse online is common both among peers and perpetrated by adults.
- » Children experience sexual abuse online by adults even daily, and an adult's messages to a child usually become sexual in less than an hour.
- » Children experience sexual abuse online so much that they think it is everyday and unremarkable.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence-based sexual education prevents child sexual abuse. It is the responsibility of adults to ensure that the child's interests and right to information are realised. It is essential that decision-makers, officials and professionals receive diverse information on the different forms of child sexual abuse and how to prevent it, so that children can be protected from sexual abuse in all environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GUARDIANS AND PROFESSIONALS

- Guardians and professionals should increase their understanding of online sexual abuse so that they can better protect children.
- Guardians and professionals must ensure that each child has sufficient knowledge and skills to respect their own and others' boundaries and to act safely online.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MUNICIPALITIES

- Professionals working with children and officials planning services for children must be provided with sufficient information to provide sexual education to children.
- Professionals working with children must be provided with supplementary training in sexual education and the prevention of sexual abuse.
- Guardians must be provided with more information about online sexual abuse so that they know how to protect the child.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WELLBEING SERVICES COUNTIES

- In wellbeing services counties, adequate support services must be provided for children who have experienced sexual abuse and their families.
- In order to prevent sexual abuse, wellbeing services counties must ensure adequate support services for persons of all ages who have subjected or fear they will subject children to sexual abuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MUNICIPALITIES AND WELLBEING SERVICES COUNTIES

- Decision-makers must ensure that officials, professionals working with children and volunteers are aware of their responsibilities in preventing and combating sexual abuse, including in digital environments.
- Decision-makers must ensure that they have access to up-to-date information to support their decision-making on the prevalence and forms of sexual violence, its prevention, and the diverse risks of the rapidly evolving online environment, as well as the opportunities that are exploited by those who commit sexual abuse.
- Children should be encouraged to report sexual abuse. Different approaches to listening to children should be developed and implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION-MAKERS NATIONALLY

- Decision-makers must ensure that children are protected from sexual abuse in all environments (including digital environments) by legislative means and at the level of implementation. Relevant actors must have obligations and the means for preventing and combating sexual abuse.
- Sufficient funding must be guaranteed for organisations that offer children and families low-threshold support and reporting opportunities.
- Providers of training for professionals working with children (such as vocational schools, universities of applied sciences, and universities) must offer training that equips graduates with strong knowledge and skills to deliver age- and developmentally appropriate sexual education.

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IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME

Experiences of 11-to-17-year-old-children on online sexual abuse
and sexting among peers

TEXT: SARI HAUTAMÄKI, JANITA TASA, EVELIINA KARHU, MAIJA IKONEN & HEIDI NÄPPI

ILLUSTRATIONS: RED AND BLUE

LAYOUT: ATTE NYKÄNEN / SAVE THE CHILDREN

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