Online Grooming & Going Missing: the Voices of European Survivors

CESAGRAM: Comprehensive European Strategy Against Grooming and Missing

October 2024

Missing Children Europe

KU LEUVEN

FONDAZIONE BRUNO KESSLER
FUTURE BUILT ON KNOWLEDGE

The smile of the child

cesie
the world is only one creature

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Ινστιτούτο Τεχνολογιών Πληροφορικής και Επικοινωνιών

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΑΣΤΥΝΟΜΙΑ

MCF Marie Collins Foundation
Supporting recovery from technology-assisted child sexual abuse

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Authors:
Eva Veldhuizen Ochodnicanova
Dr Helen Whittle
Dr Margaret Brennan
Theresa Ryan Rouger
Aagje Ieven
Dr. George Nakos

Contributions came from
Andrea Varella

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"Ex uno disce omnes" – "From one, all learn"

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Disclaimer

The survivor report is based on interviews conducted with real individuals. The interviews were carried out with respect to applicable ethical and legal requirements. All data collection and handling were carried out in full compliance with applicable data protection laws, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and other relevant privacy regulations.

The interview process and the subsequent report were managed by the CESAGRAM Project Coordinator, Missing Children Europe, who is responsible for ensuring that all legal and ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Missing Children Europe has taken all necessary measures to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the interviewees and to safeguard the data in accordance with legal requirements.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the confidentiality or the handling of personal data, please contact Aagje Ieven at: secretary.general@missingchildreneurope.eu.

Glossary

Child: any human being under the age of 18.

Child Sexual Abuse: the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society.

Child Sexual Exploitation: a child is a victim of sexual exploitation when she/he takes part in a sexual activity in exchange for something (e.g. gain or benefit, or even the promise of such) from a third party, the offender, or by the child her/himself.

Child Sexual Abuse Material: images, videos, live-streaming, and any other material that depicts sexual violence against a child. CSAM can include material that shows a child in a sexually suggestive or explicit manner partially clothed, or nude, and can include material that does or does not illustrate sexual activity or violence at all.

Child Trafficking: the recruitment and/or transport, transfer, harbouring, and receipt of a child by others with the intent of exploiting the child through various means, including sexually, criminally, or through child labour.

Missing Child: any child whose whereabouts are not known to their caregivers, who is outside their protective environment, and who may potentially be exposed to harm.

Offender: an individual involved in sex-based crimes against children. The term encompasses all forms of sexual offences against children, including acts carried out through or enabled by the Internet.

Online Child Sexual Exploitation & Abuse: all acts of a sexually abusive or exploitative nature carried out against a child that have, at some stage, a connection to the online environment.

Online Grooming: the process of establishing/building a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of the internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or in-person sexual contact with a person.

Victim & Survivor: The term "survivor" is increasingly used in the child protection sector, either interchangeably or in combination with the term "victim", to refer to persons who have suffered child sexual abuse & exploitation[1].

[1] Just as people may reject the term "victim" and see it as a label they do not identify with, the same could happen with the term "survivor". It is important never to label a person who does not want to be called "victim" or "survivor".

CESAGRAM Survivor Study: Our Rationale and Aims

Online grooming of children is described as a non-linear process in which several stages of abuse and exploitation can occur simultaneously, speeding up the process compared to offline grooming. While online grooming is a growing phenomenon, and missing child hotlines report that they receive more and more cases of missing children where tech-facilitated grooming was a factor[1], there is a dearth of research exploring the links between groomed and missing children and young people. A case of a child going missing puts a child at risk of adverse and even traumatic experiences, yet it can also function as an indicator of underlying factors linked to such cases and offers an opportunity to identify potential risk factors leading to these events[2]. For this reason, this European Commission funded CESAGRAM project approaches the issue of child sexual abuse online, and of groomed and missing children in particular, through the lens of survivor accounts of their experiences. This study also seeks to understand the issue from the perspective of young people with lived experience of tech-facilitated grooming that led to them going missing. Smartphones with built-in cameras facilitate ready communication using picture and video, which many young and adult offenders readily exploit[3]. Research that gives voice to survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation offers a singular opportunity to present their experiences and their perspectives on intervention and prevention, while challenging the culture of silence in which abuse and exploitation persists. By reconstructing their journeys from the point where they met a stranger online to the point where they went missing, we aim to identify:

- Risk factors that can enable and inform prevention of tech-facilitated grooming and missing cases, and
- Criteria that can help professionals receiving missing reports to identify victims of grooming and child sexual abuse online, ensuring they receive appropriate support before, during and after their disappearance.

What we did – Study Methodology

A qualitative study design was used to explore the lived experiences of survivors of tech-facilitated grooming and missing episodes. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit a sample of approximately 20 European young people aged 18-24 with experience of going missing as children, that is before the age of 18, with links to tech-facilitated grooming. Purposive sampling refers to intentionally selecting participants based on their characteristics, knowledge, experiences, or some other criteria. The study specifically focused an over 18 age group, as they were keen to ensure that the participant group had sufficient time to receive support, and to process their experiences. Recruitment proceeded with the support of the CESAGRAM project's partners, NGO networks and social service providers,

Consortium partners and their extensive networks throughout Europe. Recruitment efforts attempted to take into account the gender balance of victims and to ensure that survivors maintained both experiences of tech-facilitated grooming and going missing; however given the reliance on protected third party recruitment in many cases, the self-selecting nature of the sample, and a concern to give voice to all who volunteered for interview, it was not possible to assure this demographic representation in every aspect. Not every case can be fully representative of the overall caseload, but it I possible to ensure that the overall sample incorporates key aspects of the chosen demographic.

The study was conducted under the oversight of an Ethical Advisory Board comprising of experts in the domain of forensic psychology, sex education and missing.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with survivors to identify risk and protective factors, as well as needs and gaps in services at each step of the grooming process: before being groomed, while being groomed and before the child went missing, during and after the missing episode. In all cases, interviews were conducted by two forensic psychologists with bespoke training and experience in victim interviewing. Following transcription and deidentification of interview transcripts, a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used to analyse the interview data.

The Survivors

A total of 20 survivors of grooming, sexual abuse and missing episodes participated in this study. Participants were aged between 18-27 years, with an average (mean) age of 21.9 years. Female survivors were represented more frequently in the sample (*n*=16, 80%) than male survivors (*n*=4, 20%). 11 European nationalities were represented across the sample. The average age at the onset of their victimisation was 13.5 years. The reported duration of the abuse varied greatly, ranging from 2 days to 10 years. The average duration of abuse was 2.3 years. Just over two-thirds of the survivors (*n*=13) experienced episodes of going missing as a result of grooming. Table 1 (below) contains a summary of participant and case characteristics.

Table 1 Participant and Case Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Online / In-person Abuse	Age at abuse onset	Duration	Current Age	Number of Offenders	Missing?
Nora	F	Belgium	Online	14	4 months	26	1	No
George	M	Cyprus	Online	16	2 weeks	21	1	No
Zoe	F	Denmark	Online	15	2 years	24	10	No
Louie	F	England	Both	15	2 days	23	1	Yes
Kate	F	England	Both	10	6 years	22	≈50*	Yes
Maria	M	Greece	Both	16	2 years	20	3	Yes
Hara	F	Greece	Online	14	3 months	19	2	Yes
Joy	F	Greece	Online	14	2 months	20	1	No
Konos	F	Greece	Both	12	1 month	21	1	Yes
Sara	M	Iceland	Online	16	2 years	27	1	No
Iris	F	Ireland	Online	11	2 years	22	≈10	No
Luka	F	Lithuania	Online	17	4 months	21	1	Yes
Sofija	M	Lithuania	Online	15	1 year	18	1	No
Vita	F	Lithuania	Both	17	6 months	21	1	Yes
Belle	F	Netherlands	Both	14	6 months	19	≈5	Yes
Layla	F	Netherlands	Both	14	2 years	18	≈5	Yes
Ricardo	F	Netherlands	Both	12	8 years	27	≈50	Yes
Jana	F	Slovakia	Both	11	1.5 years	20	1	Yes
Alba	F	Sweden	Both	9	9 years	25	≈400	Yes
Tilly	M	Sweden	Both	8	10 years	24	≈60-70	Yes

* ≈ refers to an approximation- survivors weren't able to say for certain how many offenders there were.

Survivor Experiences – What they told us

Risk Factors

Survivors reported a range of risk factors which may have contributed to their vulnerability to being groomed and going missing. These risk factors conformed to various types of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (the term originated in a groundbreaking study conducted in 1995 by the Centers for Disease Control and the Kaiser Permanente health care organization in California), and could broadly be grouped into Individual, Familial, Social and Abuse Factors. It is likely that the *combination of multiple risk factors* increased vulnerability to both grooming and missing.

Adverse Childhood Experiences identified by the survivors:

Individual Factors

- **Negative self-image**
  - *"I had very low self-worth and I had very low self-confidence" - Zoe*
- **Mental health challenges**
  - *"I was having a lot of panic attacks [...] my mental health was so bad, [...] so when someone came into my life and started telling me all these great things and promising me money and a better future, I just jumped at the chance for it really." - Kate*

Social Factors

- **Loneliness (links to neglect)**
  - *"My brothers had moved away from home [...] I had moved away from school as well, there was a lot of change happening and I didn't have any friends [...] I was just living with my mum at the time [...] she was working long hours, so I didn't really see her. So I was basically just at home alone for most of the time [...]...so that's when I started turning to other social platforms to try to talk to people." - Kate*
- **Peer influences- Negative social circle**
  - *"I hung out with girls who were themselves were hanging out with much older boys [...] All my friends had something- [...] So I didn't do one thing, I did them all. I started stealing a lot. And I started cutting myself. And I started doing drugs and drinking [...] those friendships were definitely not healthy." - Belle*
- **Bullying**
  - *"School was a nightmare [...] a huge amount of bullying. [...] I ended up with broken bones, hospital visits. I had death threats in the post [...] I had no friends in real life". - Ricardo*

Familial Factors

- **Divorce**
  - *"My parents separated. Twice...I definitely found that very hard. It was war between my parents..." - Layla.*
- **Parental substance misuse**
  - *"I've been connected to social services my entire life [...] my mum was doing drugs actively [...] - Tilly*
- **Domestic violence**
  - *"[my father] was quite abusive to my mum. To a lesser extent myself [...] any contact with me was generally quite abusive [...]. Threatening, violent, a lot of alcohol abuse." - Louie*
- **Exposure to illness & death (if the child is not in the role of child carer, if through circumstances are forced to take on parental responsibilities)**
  - *"I didn't have a childhood. [...] I didn't talk to my mother; she was in a coma. [...] we didn't know if she would live or not [...] when my mum came back, I then had to take care of both my mum and my brother." - Konos*
- **Placement in alternative care**
  - *"When I was 15, I was first put into full time foster care [...] I was already in half time foster care beforehand, starting from when I was eight [...] and then I got kicked out of home. I was homeless for a bit." - Tilly*

Abuse Experiences

- **Neglect**
  - *"My entire home life was just immensely fucked up and I was just neglected... There was nothing really to drink apart from the 50 cans of beer scattered around the table. And I was hungry." - Tilly*
- **Physical violence**
  - *"One of my sister's first memories in life is waking up [...] to my mom's boyfriend at the time holding a knife to my neck, saying he was going to kill both of us." - Tilly*
- **Sexual abuse**
  - *".... I was raped by my stepbrother at 16." - Alba*

Survivors in this study considered the online space to be a fundamental aspect of their social lives; notwithstanding, the way in which this potentially amplified the existing risk factors (e.g., loneliness) is of note. *"I had no friends in real life. So, I decided to go online and find some friends." (Iris)*

For some survivors, the internet offered some solace from other difficulties encountered in their lives. *"When I was eight, I started going online pretty much all the time, every day [...] reading and using the internet have been my main escapes throughout life, especially throughout my childhood [...] Mum's been abusive and neglectful of me my entire life... I had the internet." (Tilly)* Interestingly, many survivors drew a direct link between their loneliness, searching for a social connection and their being groomed or their exposure or vulnerability to grooming, consistent with previous studies[4].

Relatedly, the relationship between low self-esteem and online grooming is well known, not only to practitioners and academics[5], but also to groomers themselves, who often exploit low self-esteem[6].

This was also evident through the survivor accounts and was used as part of trust development. In some cases, vulnerability linked to sexual orientation was reported as a pathway factor for low self-esteem and online grooming.

Survivor's narratives illustrated the mutually reinforcing relationship between risk factors and vulnerability to grooming. Many of the risk factors were described as chronic, lasting months and sometimes years, meaning that these distal vulnerabilities may have predisposed them to online grooming; in some cases acted as proximal factors that precipitated the grooming shortly before it happened, and once the grooming had started, may have acted as a barrier to disclosure. This finding aligns with existing studies, which also show that greater numbers of ACEs increase risk to OCSEA[7][8][9] as well as to going missing[10].

Importantly, several participants also reported a lack of these vulnerabilities, which mirrors previous research. One in three participants reported ordinary, happy childhoods with loving families free of traumatic experiences:

> *"I used to go to school, go out to the playground with my friends, do homework, run to the store, play sports [...] basically living a carefree life. It actually only started with that stupid Facebook thing. "*
>
> – Jana

These positive facets of childhood, described as protective factors from sexual violence by previous research, imply two things[11]. Firstly, anyone, regardless of their vulnerabilities, can become victimised by online grooming. While the vulnerabilities may increase risk, this does not mean that in absence of them, there is no risk of online grooming. Second, it suggests that protection programming may want to focus on reinforcing these existing protective factors, such as supportive family dynamics,

strong friendships, and engagement in extracurricular activities, to help mitigate the risks of online grooming, although some survivors did recount that while they had such protective factors in place, the abuse still occurred.

Another important finding is that vulnerabilities can co-exist and exacerbate one another, to not only increase risk of grooming and missing episodes, but also the likelihood that children will not disclose and experience renewed victimisation.

Going Missing

Thirteen of the twenty survivors (65%) reported going missing, with considerable variability in experiences of going missing. While three survivors reported going missing once, the majority went missing more frequently and, due to the extent of the missing incidents, (which varied from several hours to weeks or months) several survivors could only estimate the quantity of these *"definitely over a dozen times"* (Alba).

Three types of going missing cases were identified by survivors:

Table 2 Types of going missing cases

Groomer-initiated	Grooming consequence	Familial Challenges
The most frequent, where the groomer suggests that they should meet up.	Where grooming victimisation is the catalyst for going missing from home.	Where the survivor's difficult home circumstances led to going missing from home, which subsequently raised the risk of grooming and sexual violence.

Survivors described a diverse set of techniques used by groomers to initiate contact, ranging from manipulation and persuasion to direct threats or coercion, with the survivors' responses seemingly influenced by a mix of caution, coercion, and external intervention.

In one case, the groomer spent several months stalking the victim:

> *"His visits to my school were becoming more and more frequent. One time I wasn't quite paying enough attention [...] he took a picture of me [...] and sent it saying that he saw me and that he was waiting."*
>
> *– Jana*

Table 3 Survivor Experiences of Grooming

Survivor Experiences of Grooming and Going Missing	
	Grooming Initiating Missing Episodes *"He told me that it would be important to meet up... he said 'don't you want to talk in person? Listen, do you know where the mall is?' I said yes, he said 'good, we'll meet there.'" - Konos*
	Escape from Grooming *"I panicked and decided that maybe I had to do something. [...] I decided to leave. I told my parents I'd be staying at my classmate's house [...] but I didn't tell them which one. [...] They tried to contact me, so I ignored the calls [...] after two days, a police officer found me." - Vita*
	Preceding Grooming Incidents *"I had a lot of arguments with my mum from an early age, and at one point it just got so out of hand. [...] So, when I was invited to a party and my mother said no, again [...] I ran away. And if I still didn't want to come home then yes, I needed a place to sleep". - Belle*

All survivors who experienced going missing did so following initiation by the groomer in at least one missing episode.

Three survivors described a different pathway from grooming to going missing. In these cases, the survivors concerned were seeking an escape *following* grooming. Two survivors sought escape following the offenders' threat to publish their CSAM.

These cases show that grooming can also form an incentive to go missing, when the survivors feel they don't know what else to do to stop their abuse.

In four cases, the episodes of going missing from home preceded the grooming incidents. In all four cases, this related to difficult parent-child relationships. This is consistent with previous research, which shows that many children who go missing have had adverse experience in their home environments[12][13]. In these cases, going missing posed a risk of grooming and other CSEA, as opposed to grooming presenting a risk of going missing.

These different types of missing episodes shed some light on how going missing and grooming interact with one another. It suggests that grooming can act as a catalyst for

children going missing, while instances of going missing can, in turn, increase the risk of grooming and CSEA. This relationship indicates that one vulnerability can amplify another. Therefore, it is suggested that 'going missing' can be considered both a risk factor increasing vulnerability to online grooming and abuse, but also as an indicator of grooming and abuse. An episode of missing is very visible, whereas grooming and abuse are not. When there is a very visible sign that something's already very wrong, or something's about to be very wrong, and it can be used as a lever to provide support and/or prevention. That is why missing is an interesting phenomenon to use, is a point where there's leverage, official instances get involved, something can be done at this point and change a child's life for the better. Missing in itself is a risk factor for many adverse experiences.

Signs of Abuse

In some cases, survivors described adults in their lives having seen their messages or video calls with the groomer or further evidence of abuse, such as knowing that they were in a "relationship" with an older man. Unfortunately, for these survivors, such awareness did not result in an intervention that stopped the abuse.

"My parents caught me once in my room while I was doing it, [...] I told them I like to masturbate and that was it. Then they left and never mentioned it again because all things related to sex were a taboo."

– Zoe

Almost half of the survivors identified that a responsible adult that had been made aware of their abuse (in three cases this is because the survivor disclosed), without reacting to this.

"Everyone knew that this man was an adult. Every single person in my life, including my treatment home, was aware."

– Tilly

"I wanted it to stop. I felt like I couldn't make it stop, and I wanted it to stop. So, I did disclose, but they didn't really do anything about it."

– Alba

This finding has clear implications for awareness raising and training for adults, including parents and professionals, as opportunities to safeguard the survivors were missed.

Survivors also described more subtle indicators of the abuse, which comprised further missed opportunities to safeguard them. Eleven participants (55%) reported that they were showing signs of abuse that could have been picked up by parents, social workers, police, teachers, therapists, or healthcare workers.

> *"I feel like there were a lot of times where someone could have done something [...] an adult should have stepped in to make sure I went in a better direction [...] nobody did anything, beyond patting me on the shoulder and saying, "it'll be okay."*
>
> – Zoe

Participants noted that subtle signs of ongoing grooming, such as school absence, school performance, expensive gifts, episodes of going missing, drug use and mental health declines should have been picked up on by others, but were in most cases ignored, (see Table 4, below).

Table 4 Signs of Abuse

Sign	Example
1. School Absence: The child presents with absenteeism & lateness at school.	Louie: "There's a lot of things that [...] would be flagged up now, like persistent absence, lateness, certain things dropping completely, that would be seen as a cause for concern [...] it was completely out of character".
2. School Performance: General changes in child's performance at school	Sara: "My grades went from quite good to just awful [...] For my grades to be dropping down like that over the past four years is just very obvious indicator that something was wrong".
3. Expensive Gifts: Presence of unexplained expensive material items in child's possession.	Tilly: ""[the offenders] would order me a lot of gifts, I called them my sugar daddy and mummy [...] expensive gifts, to my treatment home. And I'd open this stuff in front of all the staff".
4. Drug Use: Child is misusing drugs/alcohol.	Belle: "I think if there had been much earlier intervention, and maybe signs had been noticed much earlier, it wouldn't have all gotten so out of hand [...] my drug use, as with my alcohol use."
5. Mental Health: Decline in a child's mental wellbeing.	Tilly: "I was severely depressed, I was underage, I didn't sleep, I was starving myself, and I was self-harming. [...] and I'm just talking about the visible aspects [...] I think that it's painfully obvious that I've been sexually abused, groomed in my life".

6. Going Missing: Child is going missing from home/social services	Belle: ""The police came to our house because I had run away again [...] then they saw those lingerie sets, and knew that this wasn't really normal for a 14-year-old girl [...] they saw my phone, and all the names in it, they knew them all".

Disclosure

Just over half (*n*=11, 55%) of the survivors in this study disclosed the abuse. Two thirds of survivors disclosed the abuse at least once (*n*=13), to their parents (35%) but also to police (15%), professionals (therapists and social workers) (15%) and teachers (5%). However, for six survivors, the initial disclosure did not lead to their safeguarding, allowing for a continuation of the abuse.

A similarity between cases was evident; often the disclosure occurred when participants felt they had no choice but to tell someone. *"That process culminated to a certain point where I came to a point of "yep, now I have to tell my parents", which I absolutely did not want to do". Nora*

Reasons for disclosure

Within this sample, survivors identified three triggers for disclosure:

Sharp decline in Mental health: *"I was hospitalised three times after those suicide attempts. And on the third occasion, my mother said to me "if you don't tell me what's going on, I'm not taking you out". Iris*

Imminent Danger from Offender: *"Mum said "Jana, I need you to go to the store". That's when I froze. [...] I told her "Okay, I'll go". I went to my room and a terrible panic came over me. [...] I told myself I can't do it, I can't go outside this house [...] So I confessed. I confessed" Jana*

Following CSAM sharing: In three cases (15%) the choice to disclose came after survivor's images had already been spread by the offender through their social circles.

Barriers to Disclosure

Almost all participants (*n*=19) experienced a period during the abuse in which they did not want to disclose what was happening to them. Four main reasons were cited as to why survivors did not want to disclose the abuse: fear, shame, a lack of confidants and fear of disbelief, in line with previous studies.

Ongoing relationship with the abuser: "*...if you do this, then we can go on holiday..."* Alba.

Fear of negative social reactions: *"I was really scared, I didn't tell my sister, and I didn't even tell my mom that I had sort of messed this up. Admitting it was very difficult. I kept thinking to myself what would happen if she saw those pictures, I… I just couldn't. So, I didn't tell anyone about it, I just kind of went through it alone." Jana*

"I was also someone known as an "attention seeker". I was afraid no one would believe me. Because... Everyone knew the guy. Okay, so I thought, that's not possible. Can't tell anyone". Belle

Internal Emotions: shame & self-blame **play a major role in non-disclosure** *"Shame played the biggest role here, at least in my situation […] my mother and I had a close relationship, but it would have been embarrassing to talk about such topics". Luka*

Lack of trusted confidants: *"I didn't have anyone I felt comfortable enough with, so I didn't share it with anyone". Zoe*

Given the barriers to disclosure, it is perhaps unsurprising that many survivors disclosed only when they felt there were no other options open to them. Previous studies have found similar findings, which they have called the "pressure cooker effect", where a disclosure of CSEA is prompted by high internal (psychological) or external (social) pressure[14].

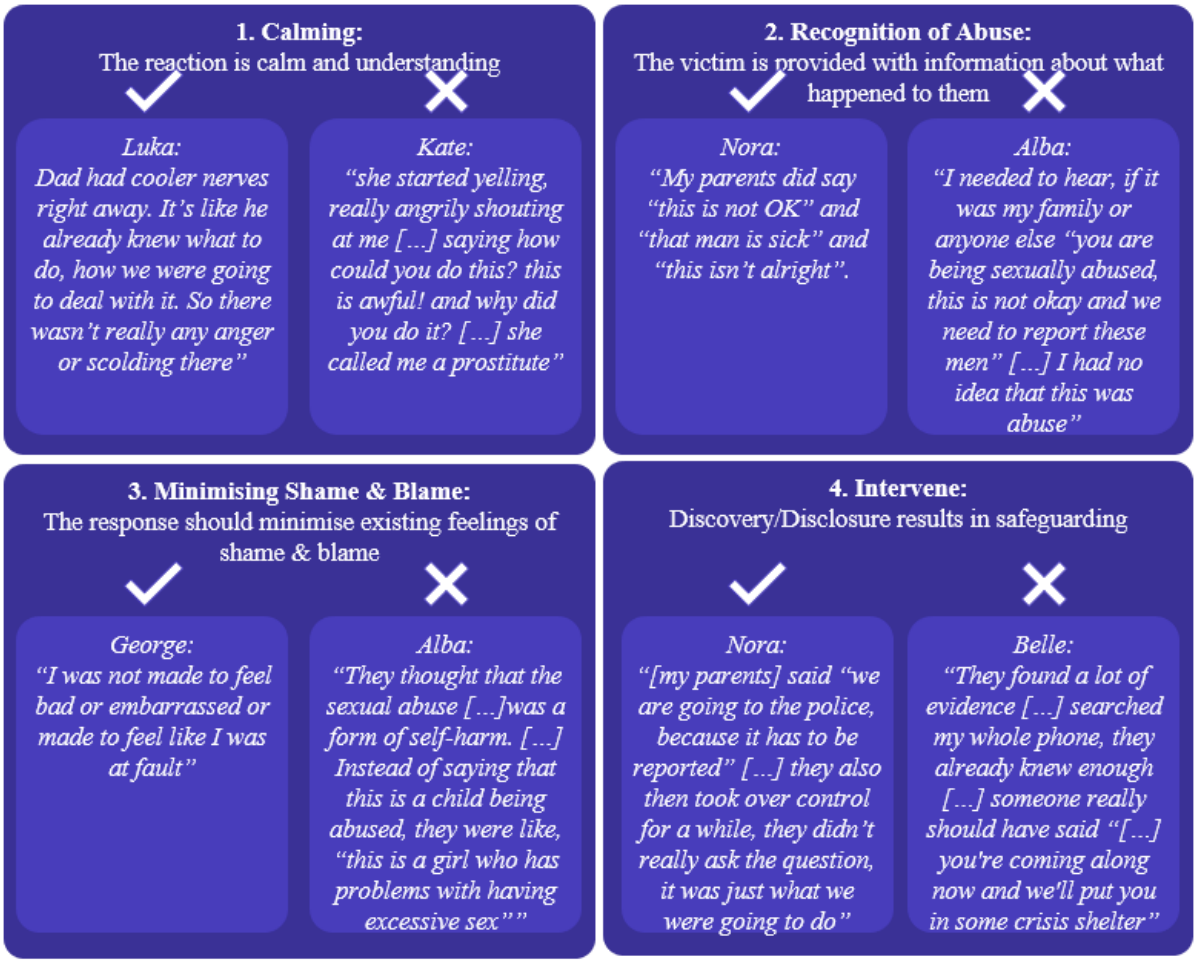
"To the children, the young people: seek help from someone you feel comfortable with. Try to disclose it in whatever way you can. You know, you shouldn't have to do this alone."

– Ricardo

Reactions to Disclosure/Discovery of Abuse

Survivors noted vastly different responses from those who became aware of their abuse, whether through disclosure or discovery. Nine participants (40%) received helpful responses, while five (25%) experienced unhelpful reactions following disclosure or discovery. Figure 1 illustrates four primary factors in determining whether a reaction was considered helpful or not, with both positive and negative examples described by participants.

Figure 1 Reactions to Disclosure/Discovery of Online Grooming



Consistent with prior research[1516], the findings illustrated in Figure 1 underscore the importance of safe disclosure environments as the first step in countering the grooming tactics used by offenders. By helping children to understand their experiences and helping them to reframe their perception of their experience from a position of self-blame to recognition of status as a victim/survivor of abuse, disclosure can serve as a pivotal step towards the healing process for survivors. On the other hand, poor disclosure practices that shame, blame or further stress children, or ones that do not result in an intervention, risk re-victimising children and prolonging their recovery. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that adults in various child protection contexts, as well as within the family, receive effective education on handling and responding to disclosures.

Influencers on the Decision to Report to the Police

Sixteen participants (80%) reported offences against them to the police. In taking the decision whether to report or not, the influence of others was a determining factor, with survivors describing that other people either encouraged or discouraged reporting.

Key Influencers on reporting

Family: *"Dad contacted the guy and asked for the photos to be deleted. If they were not deleted and somehow, he still tried to communicate with me, then we'd go to the police." Luka*

Police: *"He's [police officer] been a very big part of me actually deciding to go through with reporting". Tilly*

Counsellors and teachers: *"My teacher told me we should report [...] it took him two weeks to convince me to make a statement".*

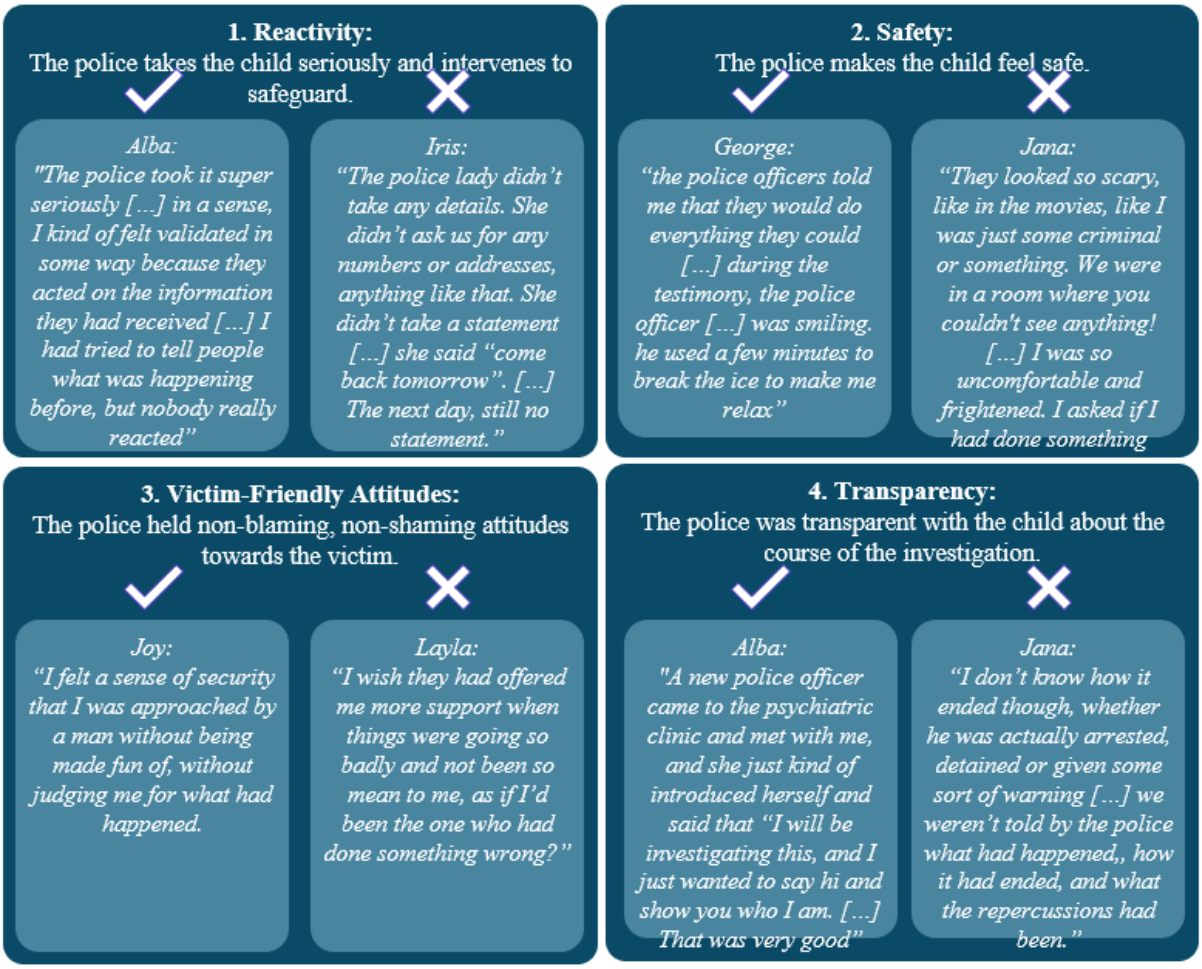
The finding that adults were a key influence in decisions to report is important. Previous studies have suggested that the more people the child discloses to, the more likely it is that they also disclose to the police[17], but this study is unique in showing how these disclosures relate to one another: how a disclosure to a confidant might lead to that confidant encouraging a police report.

Experiences with Law Enforcement

Thirteen (65%) survivors were interviewed by police officers following their report. Participants' interaction with law enforcement spanned the spectrum from very positive experiences to very negative experiences.

Four themes were raised by participants in their judgment of interactions with police, highlighted in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Law Enforcement Reactions



It's important to note that, by keeping survivors in the dark, police officers risk re-creating a power imbalance mirroring that the survivor experienced with the offender and possibly re-traumatising or re-victimising the child[18].

Disappointment with the Criminal Justice System

Six survivors (30%) saw sentences passed down to their offenders. In those cases where survivors were involved in the criminal justice system (CJS), their experiences were universally negative.

> *"A court viewed several movies of me being [...] raped by multiple perpetrators, [...] all the while I was crying and screaming for my life- and these acts were not considered criminal because I was over the age of sexual consent [...] the only thing that was criminal about it was that they had a camera with them. I think that's the worst betrayal I've ever experienced. I was a child, and I was scared for my life and an entire society watched and did nothing".*

– Alba

Delays in court proceedings: *"It's postponement after postponement [...] it makes me anxious about where I am, why do I have to go, what do I have to say- the longer it takes, the more stressed I get [...] it's very soul destroying". Joy*

This issue of prolonged delays, which has been highlighted in previous research[19], analyses[20] and survivor voices reports[21], is of particular concern due to the negative psychological effect it has on survivors[22]. The findings underscore an urgent need for CJS reforms aimed at expediting the legal process and enhancing victim support and agency, which was explicitly mentioned by three participants.

Victim-blaming: *"It just really amazes me, the fact of how defence attorneys treat children. The audacity they had when they asked me questions, like "does the victim know how to say no?" Tilly*

Research suggests that training criminal justice professionals in trauma-sensitive approaches could help reduce the risk of re-traumatisation[23]. As such, these findings imply that capacity building efforts should extend to CJS actors, to ensure that in addition to a trauma-informed investigation, the resulting court process does not re-traumatise the victims they are supposed to protect.

Lax sentencing: *"Genuinely horrific. It was the worst I've ever felt in my life, to be honest. And it wasn't something that they had prepared me for, they had told me it would be years and they told me that I wouldn't have to think about this for a very long time, that it's all going to be worth it". Kate*

Previous studies have highlighted that, when offenders of CSEA are handed lenient sentences, it can be traumatic and increase the risk of depression and other long-term mental health difficulties for survivors[24]. It can also create long-term negative attitudes towards the criminal justice system[25]. As such, these experiences paired with previous studies illustrate that more needs to be done to ensure victims of online grooming see justice.

Impact

This study found lasting impacts of online grooming and missing episodes on survivors, across emotional, behavioural and social domains:

- All participants reported shame, guilt, self-blame, and symptoms of PTSD, with many continuing to struggle with these feelings long after the abuse.
- Behaviourally, survivors reported the abuse led to self-harm, substance misuse, antisocial and risky sexual behaviours, highlighting the necessity of early intervention and tailored support for survivors.

- Socially, survivors faced stigmatisation and victim-blaming, resulting in significant challenges in building trust and intimacy.

All participants acknowledged that they still felt some impact of what had happened to them.

"I genuinely think that I will never be the same again. I know it's black and white thinking, but I do believe that I am damaged forever".

– Sara

Emotional Impact

All twenty survivors reported negative emotional consequences following the abuse they experienced, including feelings of shame, guilt; self-blame; self-hatred; fear; despair and symptoms of trauma.

Shame & Guilt: *"It definitely still makes me feel quite ashamed to be honest and quite secretive. I still haven't really ever told a lot of people close with me about what's happened". Kate*

Self-Blame: *"You've done it to yourself, and all those men have been all over you [...] there was a really deep sense of shame. Because you really feel like it's your own fault" Ricardo*

Self-Hatred: *"Hated myself. I really, really hated myself [...] everything about myself. Couldn't understand a lot*

Fear: *"For a very long time, I was very stressed, and I slept very badly [...] what would happen if those images came out, and what would everyone think of me? [...] in my head it had just sort of taken on this enormous catastrophic proportion that my life was going to end". Nora*

Despair: *"I felt like I lost the earth beneath my feet [...] everything was destroyed. I'd lost everything [...] I literally wanted the earth to open up and swallow me [...] it flattened me" George*

PTSD-related symptoms: *"I have complex PTSD [...] I can't focus on anything because of it. I try to study, and then after five minutes, my brain blanks [...] I can't think anymore. My brain doesn't allow me to. That's kind of rough" Tilly*

Most participants reported still feeling the emotional impact of their grooming years after the abuse came to an end. Prior research has similarly found that online grooming can emotionally impact survivors in the long term[26], and indeed should be considered an Adverse Childhood Experience[27]. The grooming, particularly in the context of other risk factors, may have heightened participants' vulnerability to these long-term emotional struggles[28].

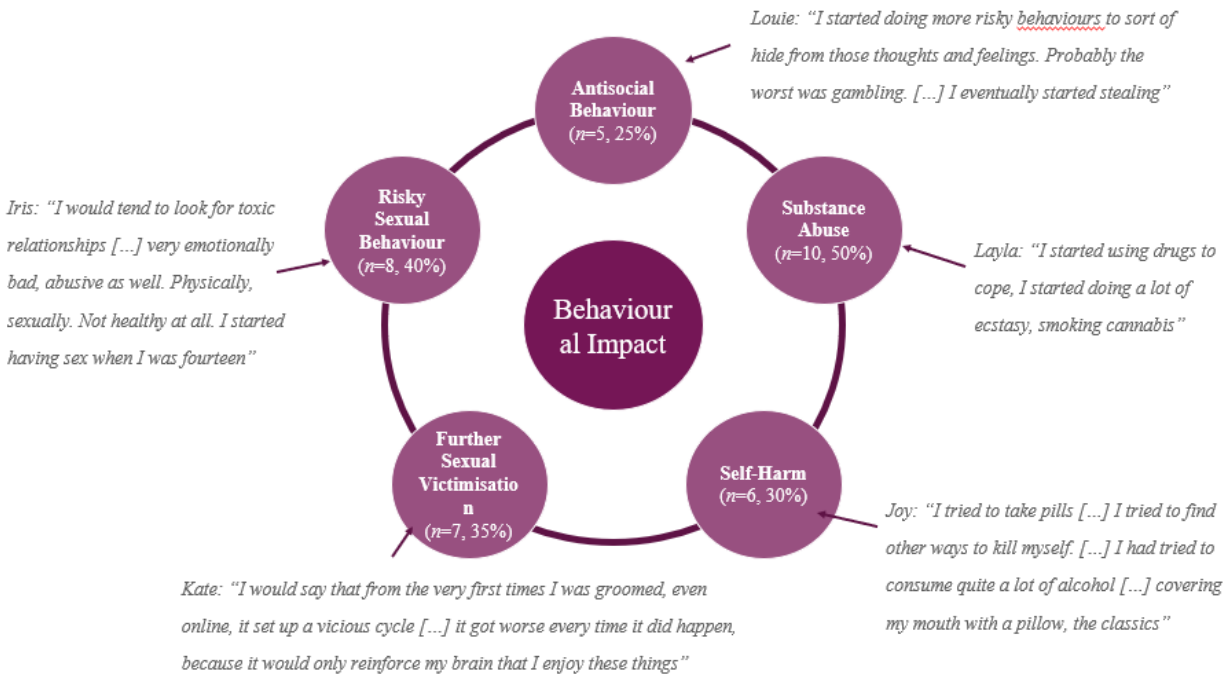
The cyclical, persistent presence of shame and guilt should be highlighted here, existing both during the grooming itself, made worse by offender tactics, as well as by a lack of recognition of the abuse by caregivers, victim-blaming reactions from law enforcement and the CJS. The consistent reinforcement of these feelings therefore unsurprisingly has been found to play a role in the long-term impact of online grooming, both in this study as well as in prior research[29]. Importantly, shame and guilt contribute to the barriers to disclosure. Therefore, some of the barriers will increasingly be eroded if adult responses become more effective, compassionate and survivor focussed.

It's important to note that no relationship was found between the type of abuse experienced and emotional impact. This suggests that the harms of grooming and going missing demand equal recognition and intervention from society, policymakers, and support services, regardless of whether the abuse occurred online or in person.

Behavioural Impact

All participants noticed that their victimisation affected their behaviour, primarily in five domains: self-harm; substance misuse; antisocial behaviour, risky sexual behaviour and sexual victimisation, illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Behavioural Impacts of Online Grooming



Self-harm, substance abuse, antisocial behaviour, risky sexual behaviour, and sexual victimisation all fall in line with previous research on the behavioural consequences of online grooming[3031], as well as research on sexual poly-victimisation[3233] (the phenomenon of one form of sexual victimisation

increasing the risk of being sexually victimised again in the future), reinforcing the importance of early detection and intervention to prevent these cycles of abuse. Moreover, these findings underscore the urgency for organizations serving at-risk youth, such as alcohol and drug addiction centres, to integrate routine inquiries about potential sexual victimization and other ACEs. This approach is critical to ensure youth services adapt to the distinct needs of CSEA survivors, which has been shown to make them more effective for this particularly vulnerable group[34].

Social Impact

Many participants experienced changes in their social lives as a result of their abuse. It is important to outline the negative societal reactions that may have contributed to these social changes, namely stigmatisation by others.

Table 5 Social Impact on survivors

Stigmatisation	*"Social services wanted to lock me up. My family took away my phone and turned off the Wi-Fi. And the psychiatrist said, "you have a problem with self-harm [...] So everyone thought that the problem was me, which I also thought [...] I needed someone to say, 'you're not the problem here'". - Alba* *"I was being judged by a lot of kids at school [...] they called me a whore. [...] saying that I was the one who wanted the video to be uploaded [...] they never once sat down to listen to what had happened". - Hara*
Alienation	*"It felt like I was becoming more and more alienated from home. Because of the activities I was involved in. I no longer felt like that little boy". - Ricardo*
Trust & Intimacy	*"I don't open up easily anymore. Regarding trust- there is none. [...] I don't open up. Talking to someone now, even a friend, I don't... I don't feel safe". - Konos*

Survivors' Experiences of the Offender

Research has shown that online groomers (offenders) use rapport building to form a relationship (Chiang & Grant, 2017; Gupta, Kumaraguru, & Sureka, 2012; Williams et al., 2013), use flattery and compliments (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017), and introduce sexual topics to the conversations, either after a sense of trust has been created (O'Connell, 2003) or early in the conversation (Winters et al., 2017). When it comes to the motives of the offenders, it has often been assumed that online offenders have the ultimate goal of arranging an offline meeting to sexually abuse the child, and as such the online contact has been viewed only as a preparatory act (Chiang & Grant, 2017, Joleby 2021). While an offline meeting is indeed the end goal for some offenders (Lorenzo-Dus, Izura, & Pérez-Tattam, 2016; Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2017), others use the online contact for cybersex and masturbation (e.g., De Hart et al., 2017). Briggs and colleagues (2011) have elaborated on two classifications of online offenders that are contact-driven offenders and fantasy-driven offenders. The contact-driven offenders focus on establishing a connection with victims, but with the ultimate intention of meeting offline. Fantasy-driven offenders appear to be more online users, with the purpose of engaging the victim in cybersex (Joleby 2021).

As Table 1 shows, half of the interviewed survivors were groomed by one offender (*n*=10), while the other half were groomed by multiple offenders. In almost all cases where there were multiple offenders (*n*=9), there were varying degrees of inter-offender collaboration. Five cases for instance involved one offender being a trafficker and the other a buyer (See Section below). However, in the four other cases, offenders would work in tandem with one another, as Alba states:

> *"They would discuss where to find children, how to "train" them, how to get them to keep quiet, exchange usernames, films and pictures and brag about what they had done."*
>
> – Alba

This finding that grooming frequently involved multiple offenders is relatively new. Most existing studies focus on one offender, or when multiple offenders are involved, choose to focus on the earliest, or most severe cases[35].

In addition, inter-offender collaboration has been studied before, but mostly in reference to CSAM production and sharing, not online grooming[36]. This discovery is significant for both law enforcement and child protection professionals, as it indicates that assuming single offender involvement may overlook the full complexity of online grooming and missing cases.

Gender. Offenders were predominantly described as male. This is consistent with previous research findings, although it is widely recognised that female-perpetrated crime is under-recognised and therefore underreported[37][38].

Age. Of the sixteen participants that described the age of their offenders, one key detail was their youth: in nine cases, at least one offender was a young adult (aged 18-24), while in two cases, the individual who groomed them was a minor (aged 13 and 14, respectively). This critical finding spotlights the often-overlooked role that peers and minors can play in grooming[39][40].

Moving beyond the traditional focus on adult perpetrators[41] this study emphasizes the need for stakeholders to better understand and address harmful behaviours among children. It advocates for targeted prevention and intervention strategies to more effectively safeguard minors online.

Notwithstanding, it should be considered that this study was based solely on survivor experiences. Therefore, in cases where the survivor did not meet the offender, there is a possibility that the offender lied about their age, as has been shown to be the case in previous studies[42].

Age preference. In all but one case, survivors maintained that offenders were aware of the age of the children they were grooming, some reported that the younger the child, more appealing they were for the groomer.

> *"They all knew my age because they would ask how old I was, and I would say fifteen. And they would be like "wow"- it was a positive for them. It was like a selling point"*
>
> *– Zoe*

This pattern of offenders deliberately seeking out victims based on their youth shows that this was likely an intentional tactic offenders used, rather than occurring due to mere oversight or misinformation about their victim's age.

Platforms Used in Offending

Table 6 provides an overview of the 21 online platforms listed by survivors as locales where their abuse partially or entirely took place.

Facebook. As Table 6 shows, half of the interviewed participants listed Facebook as the platform where they were initially contacted by the offender, and in many cases where they were also groomed and abused (*n*=4, 20%). The manner in which Facebook was used by offenders differed. For four participants (20%), Facebook was where they were initially approached by the offender through friend requests. Jana states for example:

> *"This guy sent me a friend request. There were a lot of people I didn't know who sent me friend requests, so I was like "okay, that's fine". Around two days later [...] he texted me and said "hey, how are you?"*

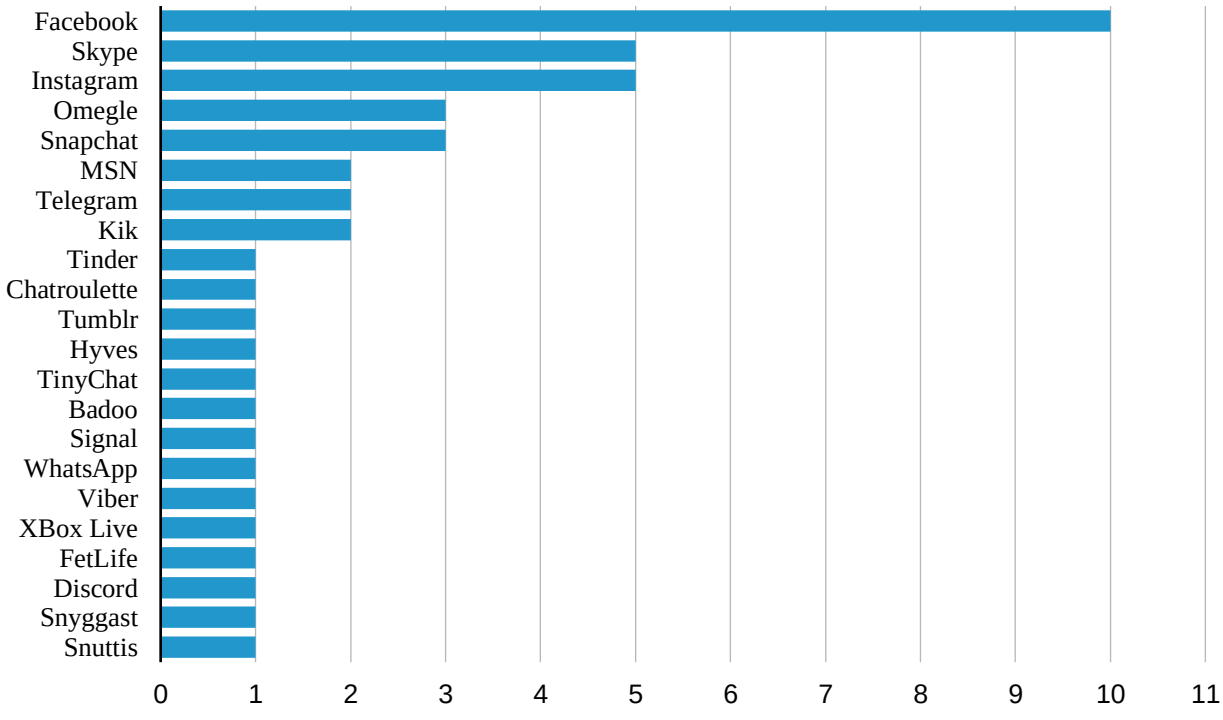
Two participants (10%) on the other hand met their offenders on Facebook Community, in search of friends. Tilly recalled:

> *"That place was a cesspit [...] you wouldn't be able to be a member of these groups if you didn't post photos of yourself, but you wanted to be in those groups because that's where the cool kids were"*

Table 6 Online Platforms Used In Grooming Offence

Offences rarely took place on one platform alone. Offenders tended to move public conversations with survivors to more private accounts and platforms, such as encrypted instant messaging apps (e.g. WhatsApp, Viber, Signal).

Dating apps (Badoo, Grindr and Tinder) were also used in the grooming offences and appeared to be particularly vulnerable places for online grooming.



Initiation and Development of the Offending Relationship

Participants described five overlapping stages used by the offender to initiate and develop the grooming relationship, so creating the space to commit their grooming offences: 1) initiating contact; 2) trust development; 3) labelling the relationship; 4) desensitisation, 5) coercion, each of which will

be elaborated on below. The offender-initiated contact online with the victim in almost two-thirds (n=13, 65%) of the cases. In most of these (*n*=11), a friend or follow request was sent by the offender and accepted by the victim. In almost a third of cases (n=6, 30% it was unclear who initiated contact with whom and in some instances, the participants were matched with strangers on Omegle and were subsequently exploited. However, it should be clarified that in cases with more than one offender, the way that contact was initiated varied. For instance, Kate's first offender-initiated contact on Xbox, but she was subsequently approached by several other offenders on Kik. She explained:

> *"I was like, it would be a good way to meet people [...] Even in the names of the group chats, it would say 13–16-year-old girls and 18+ men. At the time, I obviously didn't understand the issue with that [...] from there, a lot of the older men in it started messaging me".*

In nearly half of the cases (*n*=9), the offenders concealed their identity from the victim when initiating contact. George recalled his offender lying both about his age and gender:

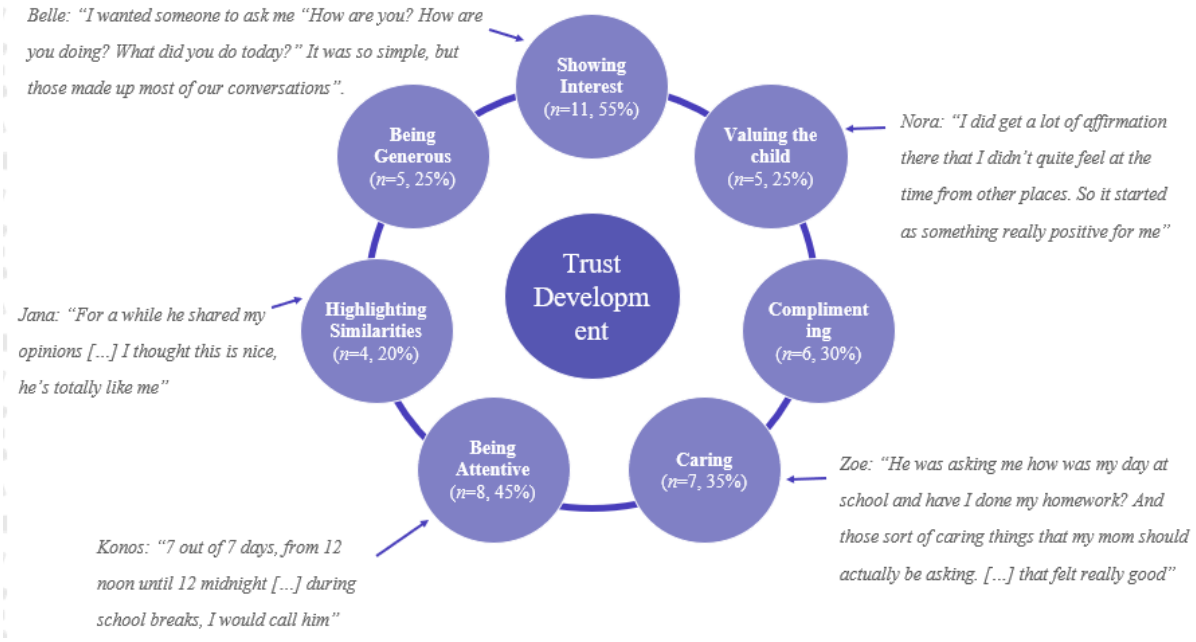
> *"I remember vividly that she told me once that she was 18 and a model"*

In Alba's case, one offender used his identity as a ploy to gain her initial trust. He initially concealed both his name and image, but later added Alba using his real account. She recalled that he told her:

> *"We've been talking for so long, I just felt you should know my real name and see a real picture of me"*

Trust Development. Having established contact with their victims, the offenders' subsequent actions were, in all 20 cases, to develop rapport and trust, through seven key tactics, illustrated in Figure 4:

Figure 4 Trust Development Tactics



Labelling the relationship. Once the offender had established trust, there were two principal ways in which they defined their relationship with the victim:

The offenders sometimes established themselves as the victims' **friends** (*n*=6, 30%).

> *"They knew everything about me. We were friends, we were very good friends, I thought"*
> *– Tilly*

However, for over half of the participants (*n*=12), one or more of the offenders portrayed their relationship as **romantic**, or as Ricardo put it, a *"kind of [...] Digital boyfriend"*.

It is critical to note the way that this emotional connection increased the survivors' sense of agency or responsibility felt towards the offender. For instance, several of the participants when describing a romantic connection with the offender, shifted the language use of the plural as opposed to the singular when discussing the relationship.

> *"I told him like we talk like we're in a relationship, and we told each other that we love each other?"*
> *– Sara*

This quote speaks to a sense of responsibility that many offenders explicitly sought to instil in victims to prevent disclosure; turning around false bond narratives, e.g., if they were in a relationship, then it wasn't 'wrong'.

Desensitisation. In all but one case (*n*= 19), offenders used methods to desensitise and normalise sexual content and conversations with their victims, and almost two-thirds (*n= 13*), noted that the sexual conversations developed gradually. The groomer introduced the topic slowly but disguised as an "easy" way to earn money.

> *"He brought up something about making money, ... he built it up very slowly, sparked the interest in me, just left it to sit with me. And so, at some point I was the one who brought it back up, I started asking"*
> *– Ricardo*

Groomers clearly adapted the sexual element of the conversation to the relevant age groups.

> *"They did that by asking me what I had done before. That's one of the first questions they'd ask, [...] when I was like 10-12 I'd answer that I had kissed a boy in school, but then as I became older and the abuse step by step got worse, I gained more "experience" and therefore answered new perpetrators with more severe examples. That way, new perpetrators quickly realised where the "starting position" was at"*
> *– Alba*

A second tactic was used whereby the groomer would initially send their own nude image to the victim, in order to normalise the process and encourage them to share theirs.

Coercion. A range of coercion strategies were used to force compliance from the victim and to prevent them from disclosing the abuse, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 Coercion Tactics

Tactic	Prevalence	Description	Example
1. Threat of loss of connection	*n*=9, 45%	The offender threatens to leave if the child does not comply with their requests.	*Iris: "He asked me to send photos of myself naked. [....] he said that if I didn't, that he would disappear and stop talking to me. I was like "okay, I've got nobody. [....] I said no a few times, and then I eventually gave in and I sent three pictures, full body"*
2. Emotional Pressure	*n*=6, 30%	The offender coerces the child by exerting emotional pressure on them.	*Ricardo: ""He offered a lot of things like "if you don't want to, you don't have to"[....] he unconsciously piled a lot of pressure on me, because he was so kind, that I got a feeling that now I actually have to, because he's being so considerate. I can't disappoint him now."*
3. Inducing Sense of Responsibility	*n*=4, 20%	The offender makes the child feel like they are the ones responsible for the abuse.	*Louie: "I was made to believe, that there was no one I could discuss this with [....] it was sort of implied that "you shouldn't be on this app [Tinder], you could get in trouble for talking to me""*
4. Material Coercion	*n*=6, 30%	The offender uses material goods (drugs, alcohol, gifts, housing) to coerce compliance from the child.	*Kate: "He started talking about "If you do this, then we can go on holiday and we can buy you loads of things and you can get your nails and hair done [....] I didn't ever see any of the money from it. He took it all. He withheld it from me"*
5. Explicit Threats	*n*=10, 50%	The offender uses explicit threats to coerce compliance from the child (e.g. threatening to share their CSAM).	*Luka: "within a few weeks after the photo, the blackmailing, so to speak, for sex [....] it ended up as a kind of blackmail attempt on his part, that if we didn't have sex, I should bring him a certain amount of money and then he would delete the photos"*

The varying tactics used by offenders both allowed them to prepare the child for further abuse, but also made it more difficult for them to report what was happening to them, as they either trusted the offender, relied on the offender for emotional or other forms of support, and/or believed that they were an active, consenting party in the "relationship" or "friendship" that the groomer had worked to establish.

Notably, the frequent, coercive use of implicit or explicit threats to withdraw contact by the offender or **threat of loss of connection**, is likely closely tied to victims' reported sense of loneliness. Most participants who reported social or familial loneliness equally reported the use of this tactic by the offender and focused on the perceived sense of emotional "care" and "support" provided by the groomer. Children and young people's' pre-existing loneliness may therefore present a substantial vulnerability to online grooming and going missing.

Offence Outcomes

The offences reported by survivors following the online grooming were highly diverse in nature and ranged across various contact and non-contact offence types These offences could be split into CSAM production; CSAM for blackmail and revenge; in-person sexual abuse and exploitation and non-sexual abuse and exploitation.

CSAM Production. In seventeen cases, the offenders' obtained CSAM from victims. In almost three-quarters (*n=14*) cases, self-generated CSAM (material recorded by the survivor and sent to the offender) was obtained. In almost half (*n=9*) cases, the offender encouraged their victim to live-stream self-generated CSAM.

> *"I think I was 12 [...] I would be invited to chat rooms where I was viewed by hundreds of perpetrators and was paid to have sex with a friend on camera. They would ask me to write their names on my body and hurt myself on camera. It was quite rough."*
> *– Alba*

In three cases the offence was a mix of online and in-person: offenders produced CSAM in person, and subsequently uploaded this online.

> *"They asked me if I wanted to record it. At first, I was hesitant. He tried to convince me that [...] I could erase it whenever I want it. He was telling me "I want to know what we look like making love" [...] a few months later, I found out that [...] it had been uploaded to pornographic sites"*
> *– Hara*

Sexual Extortion. One quarter of participants *(n=5)* described offences involving blackmail.

> *"If you don't send me more, I'm going to send these to your friends and family [...] Three years of anything he wanted, whenever he wanted. Videos, photos, the works."*
> *– Iris*

In one case, the extortion also involved in-person stalking; the groomer spent several months stalking her:

> *"His visits to my school were becoming more and more frequent. One time I wasn't quite paying enough attention [...] he took a picture of me [...] and sent it to me saying that he saw me and that he was waiting by my school for me."*
> *–Jana*

Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA). In seven cases (35%), the original intent of distributing CSAM was reported by participants to have been a form of IBSA: the non-consensual creation, distribution or threatened distribution of nude or sexual images.

"I've been tagged online in nude photos that weren't mine, because I was in an argument with someone. That person added my name and number, so the person in those images became me"
– Layla

The findings suggest that some offenders may be motivated by other factors, such as revenge-seeking if they feel that the victim has rejected them.

"When I blocked him, [...] suddenly the whole school had a picture of me. [...] I called him and asked "why are you sending my pictures?" He replied "Why are you blocking me?"
– Konos

Child trafficking. Nine participant's grooming experiences matched the definition of child trafficking[43]. In one case, the child was exploited through criminal exploitation, by being coerced to distribute drugs. In three other cases, the traffickers abused them through forms of commercial child sexual exploitation.

"Before you know it, you're in an industry of customers that want to buy sex from you. And while you're supposed to be outside playing with your friends, you're out selling your body". Ricardo (age 12 at the time)

Money was not always the currency used by survivor's traffickers. Sometimes the trafficker would force a victim to have sex with their friends in exchange for a place to sleep for the night or in other instances, other children were the currency used between the traffickers:

"This man "owned" another teenage girl that the trafficker would be allowed to have sex with in exchange for this man getting to have sex with me"
– Alba

In three cases, the offenders attempted to persuade survivors to recruit other children for sexual exploitation. Although the offenders were unsuccessful in these cases, it supports the contentions that, in some children's cases, fear of disclosure of trafficking linked to grooming may be due to concerns that they may be prosecuted for complicity in trafficking crimes. This situation can also blur the lines between victim and offender, making the criminal justice system's response to these cases more complex.

In addition to online grooming, all participants were exposed to additional forms of CSEA including the production of (self-generated) CSAM, sexual extortion and distribution of CSAM as revenge, as well as non-sexual offences. A general trend among these findings was that the longer the grooming lasted, the greater the quantity and variety of abuse survivors suffered.

Recommendations from the Survivors

Social Media and Online Platforms

Social media and online platforms implicated in grooming need to take more responsibility for detecting grooming activity amongst their online users, particularly children. Survivors described how grooming language should be detected in chats from the beginning given the distinct nature of grooming language.

> *"I've seen some discussions about "you can't detect grooming because it's the same as sexting". As someone who's seen the conversations that I have with my perpetrators [...] this is not even close to sexting. [...] And this is on non-encrypted platforms [...] you could definitely have prevented this from happening if you made detection tools available".*
>
> *- Alba*

Reporting Mechanisms: survivors offered that young peoples' social media accounts should have better and more accessible reporting mechanisms to help children and young people report problematic online spaces where grooming occurs and disclose abuse.

> *"Those groups are still a thing. They're so easy to find that children could just go on them and there's not really a way for people to report them properly and get them taken down".*
>
> *- Kate*

Law Enforcement Agencies

Positive interview environments: One big factor playing into whether survivors felt safe, was the interview environment in which they were interviewed.

> *"That was a very child friendly environment. It was very colourful, and there were loads of textiles, and it felt cosy, and I got to drink hot chocolate. [...] it was so nice that I was looking forward to going to the police, [...] it was the only place where I felt like anyone would speak to me about what happened".*
>
> *Alba*

Interview techniques: Survivors described how their interview experience left them feeling uncomfortable and frightened. Part of what made the experience unsafe was being interviewed more than once, which they experienced as both redundant and re-traumatising. "*They shouldn't draw*

it out. If you testify to one person, you shouldn't have to do it again a second time, a third time [...] to repeat it several times was so difficult". Jana

Conducting interviews according to trauma-informed, child-friendly methods.

Victim blaming attitudes: Survivors described the importance of using trauma-informed and victim-centred approaches at the level of law enforcement and social workers involved in their cases – and critically that these workers are trained to avoid communication of victim-blaming attitudes to victim in their interactions with them.

"I know they have a protocol and I know they have to ask things, but they do spin it as if it was your fault. I found that awful [...] it's very often the male police officers"
– Belle.

Key messages for LEAs'
a) Trauma-informed in their interactions with survivors; b) Child- and Victim-centric; c) Reactive to reports of abuse.

"There should be a way to tackle it to become more trauma informed [...] there's a division between cops who are "fighting evil" and social workers - but they should actually be one and the same person".
– Nora

Consistent updating of training and other education modules on grooming for police: Following the finding that adults were key in whether the offence was reported to police, awareness raising campaigns of online grooming could target children's support systems to encourage formal reporting and thereby perhaps increase current low reporting rates.

The survivors described the importance of consistent and up to date training for those involved in grooming and missing investigations to ensure that their practice is consistent with state of the art best practice.

"They should keep revising, keep up to date all the time [...] the best ways to handle the situation, the best way to care for victims, what to do with the offenders, repeat offenders [...] focus on the psychology part of it, not just talking about punishment, but about the treatment of victims."
– Tilly

Tailored support for LGBTQIA+ youth: LGBTQIA+ survivor accounts indicated a need for targeted support and protective preventive measures for particular groups as they can maintain specific vulnerabilities to being groomed online and going missing.

Education programmes for Parents, Guardians, Caregivers (PGC): PGC play a critical role in recognizing and acting upon signs of online grooming to safeguard children. Despite clear indications of abuse, many PGC failed to intervene, leaving some survivors feeling betrayed and ignored.

PGC may not recognise grooming or may be unaware of the risks attaching to age-inappropriate relationships and abusive/exploitative relationships between peers with online elements. They need to be explicitly included in education programs to better understand the nature of these online risks, including grooming and its links to going missing.

Child protection strategies

These results highlight the critical need for those involved in child protection to use trauma-informed strategies, which include an understanding of how ACEs are connected to the risk of further victimisation, including through online grooming. This approach may both improve the identification and protection of children who are at risk of online grooming, as well as increasing the likelihood of better support provision for children with histories of multiple ACEs, including those affected by online grooming.

Missing & Grooming: Stakeholders need to adopt a holistic view when encountering cases of either grooming or going missing, checking for potential links to missing and grooming, and grooming and missing. All children need to have access to information on where they can seek help following online grooming and sexual extortion, to prevent missing cases. Missing is a very visible sign and possible lever for prevention/safeguarding.

Mandatory Reporting: Professionals interacting with children such as teachers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors and police officers, in line with the Council of Europe's guidelines on reporting violence against children, should be obligated to report when they suspect grooming and risk of going missing.

Dating Apps: There is a dearth of literature investigating how dating apps and websites may be used as locales for online grooming of children but based on the survivor testimonies, they suggest that more research is needed on the role of dating apps in online grooming and going missing.

Reducing barriers to Disclosure

Survivor Informed Education: The findings underscore the need for increasing the availability of survivor-informed education in schools to create supportive environments for survivors to disclose abuse without fear, shame or blame through targeted interventions. Hotline numbers and information on where to seek help should be provided systematically by all relevant educational and health institutions.

Public Awareness Campaign: The campaigns should aim to reduce fear, shame, and discomfort for survivors, while increasing the public's awareness of the severity of OCSEA, to increase the likelihood of survivors being believed. The survivors in this study themselves show how important early disclosure is: looking back almost a third of survivors participating in this study wish they had disclosed sooner.

Further research on the link between loneliness, grooming and missing: A common coercive tactic used by the groomers was the threat of loss of contact where children also reported feeling lonely and socially isolated. Additional research is required on this finding, e.g. to understand how prevention measures for grooming and missing cases could explicitly target loneliness, and build children's resilience against this tactic.

Peer2Peer Grooming: Moving beyond the traditional focus on adult perpetrators, this study emphasizes the need for stakeholders to better understand and address harmful behaviours among children and youth in grooming and missing cases.

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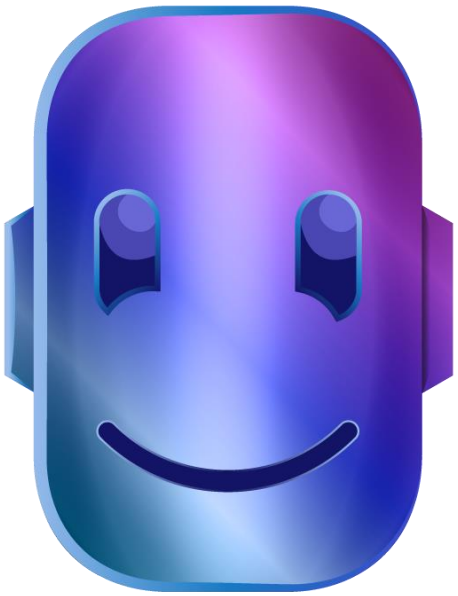

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Supporting recovery from technology-assisted child sexual abuse

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