



**“I WAS JUST LOOKING,
I DIDN’T DO
ANYTHING BAD”**

– A report on children being exposed
on expose accounts

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ECPAT Sweden is a children's rights organisation working to end the sexual exploitation of children. We spread awareness about this criminal activity and work to prevent children and young people from becoming victims of it. We focus on opinion forming and advocacy directed at those in power and we work in cooperation with public agencies, companies and other organisations. Our operations are divided into three parts: The ECPAT Hotline, a website where suspected sexual exploitation of children can be reported; Ditt ECPAT, a helpline for children and young people; and ECPAT Vuxenstöd (Adult Support), a helpline for parents and adults who work with children.

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"Where people 'expose' someone who has sent nudes or done something like that. Where the person's name, age and sometimes school is named. Or where kids call other kids bitches, whores or sluts."

(GIRL, AGE 14)

Foreword

AT ECPAT SWEDEN (ECPAT) we decided to call our annual online survey "Nude Online".

In this survey children and young people share with us their experiences and knowledge of sexual offences on the internet. In last year's survey there was a large increase in the number of children who told us about the phenomenon of so-called "expose accounts". These are anonymous accounts on social media, or online forum threads, where children share sexual content and naked images of other children. It quickly became clear to us that this is a crime in which most of the victims and those who victimise are children. We also realised that children who expose others by sharing this type of content are rarely aware that they are committing a sexual offence, and that they mainly see it as digital form harassment and bullying. When ECPAT in 2022, for the third consecutive year, conducted the "Nude Online" survey, we decided to include a deeper dive section to focus specifically on expose accounts to gather information about this new phenomenon.

The digital gap between children and adults is profound in terms of what adults know about children's exploration of sexuality online. When it comes to expose accounts, the gap is an abyss. The more we learned about expose accounts the more we understood how urgent it is for the adult world to know about this in order to act and prevent children from being victimised in this way. Being exposed can have far-reaching and devastating effects on children's and young people's wellbeing and mental health. If the adult world does not come together and act immediately, expose accounts will likely become normalised and create an internet culture where children can degrade and stalk each other in a climate where there is no accountability and minimal risk of punishment. We know that

children are experts of their own situations and that it is vital for adults to listen to children's experiences to learn what their everyday lives are like. We also know that a large part of their lives is played out online.

Children's own experiences form the basis for this report and have enabled it to be written. Using an iterative method – with children in most instances leading the way – we have found a way to reach children and young people on their own terms. The results have been overwhelming. In the 2022 edition of Nude Online, 13,433 children between the ages of 10 and 17 participated. We want to sincerely thank all of the children and young people who have so courageously shared their experiences and their knowledge with us.

We will safeguard the trust you have placed in us! We hope that this report will provide parents, teachers, counsellors or other key adults in children's lives with knowledge and materials as a basis for discussion. Based on the long-term consequences that victimisation of children on the internet can have, we hope that politicians and decision-makers will prioritise and allocate resources to tackle this problem.



Anna Karin Hildingson Boqvist
Secretary-General ECPAT Sweden

Summary

This report is an analysis of ECPAT's annual survey "Nude Online" which we conducted in cooperation with children and young people. In the report we present quantitative results from the survey and, based on open-ended responses that many children provided, we were able to add more in-depth context to the children's responses and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and their thinking.

THE FOCUS OF THE REPORT is so-called expose accounts on the internet and how these accounts or forum threads are used to disseminate sexually degrading photos and exploitative content, mainly depicting girls. In many cases the person who the photos were initially sent to is the same age and is often a partner or someone who was involved in a flirtation. These individuals have then posted the intimate photos on an expose account. Often the girls write messages in the photos or videos indicating that the person they sent them to is someone they trusted, using words such as "baby" or "I love you". In other photos the girls write that they don't want to do it anymore or that what they are being forced to do is painful; that they are traumatised. Some ask to be allowed to stop. The effects are that girls self-restrict, avoid sharing intimate content and in some cases judge others who do so. The perception of the naked body and sex as something shameful for girls has always existed in society, but expose accounts reinforce this perception and attach guilt and shame to girls' desires – often in combination with grossly misogynistic language. In a climate like this there is an increased risk that groups that are already vulnerable will be victimised because we know that the likelihood of being exposed correlates with the risk of being harassed and of being a victim of sexual or physical violence. The environment around the children signals



that this phenomenon is not serious. The platforms have functionality that actively entices children to go to expose accounts. The platforms are also slow to take down exploitative content and accounts that break the law and cause serious harm to individual children. The judicial system has failed to communicate that they are taking this phenomenon seriously. School employees do not have sufficient knowledge and are not aware that expose accounts exist. According to the children in the survey, school staff members seem to be troublingly passive in handling situations where

students are being harassed and bullied after having their photos shared on an expose account. It is therefore not surprising that children don't fully comprehend how serious it is to look at expose accounts or to participate in the ensuing gossip and harassment.

Apart from the betrayal of trust and the harassment, the situation is made worse by the child's name, age, school and social media account being posted, making it possible for others to contact and harass the child victim year after year. Some

ECPAT demands:

-  **Changes to the child pornography laws**
-  **Introduce strict liability**
-  **The platforms must take responsibility**
-  **Initiatives to increase knowledge about expose accounts**
-  **Prioritise investigations into sexual offences against children**

expose accounts have huge amounts of named photos and videos. The child's personal information in combination with the large volume of photos means that the material will be leaked multiple times for many years and the child will be able to be tracked for a long time into the future. Sexual offences involving spreading exploitative content on expose accounts could, in the most serious cases, result in a prison sentence.

It is important to point out that many of those committing crimes associated with expose accounts are children themselves. The survey indicates that exposing someone in this way can lead to verbal and physical harassment, exclusion, blackmail, threats and rape. Constant harassment has a very negative effect on a child's wellbeing. In the survey, children said that they stopped going to school or going out at all. They also said they felt constantly anxious or depressed, engaged in self-harming or attempted suicide.

That children are victims of a sexual offence is entirely unacceptable and the constant rights violations that children are exposed to must stop now.



In the Nude Online 2021 survey there were numerous stories about expose accounts and what it was like to be exposed, i.e. have naked photos shared on an expose account.

THESE STORIES STOOD OUT for a number of reasons, not least of which is that they were often about children victimising other children. It was also clear that being exposed often led to serious and lasting suffering for the child victims, and that this seriously increased the risk of becoming victims of other abuse and crimes. When ECPAT looked into this issue, it was evident that expose accounts are a phenomenon that almost no adults know about. This includes adults who work with children, such as teachers, counsellors and social workers. It also seems that children are more reluctant to turn to the adult world for support than in the case of other offences. We therefore want to start with a short explanation of what expose accounts are and what place they have in many children's lives.

In 2022 more children than previously contacted our "Ditt ECPAT" helpline with questions about photos that are shared in forums such as Reddit and Discord. A user starts a thread, often with a misogynistic name and/or the word "expose" in the heading. The user then encourages others to share naked photos of girls. More users then join the forum and share their own links to Dropbox or other file-sharing services where exploitative images, subscriptions and/or links to content are sold.

What is an expose account?

An anonymous account where mainly children and young people share naked and sexualised photos of other children and young people.

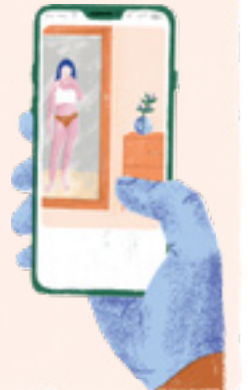
89 percent of the children in this year's survey know what an expose account is.

The content is shared with those in the child's proximity and social network.

The content is linked to a specific child by providing information about who the child is and sometimes including contact details.

It is common for the content to be photos that girls in grades 4-6 have taken of themselves.

The effects of being "exposed" are often serious and can last for many years.



Many users ask girls and women that they know for images and then provide their name and school. Expose accounts can be both local and global. The discussion threads clearly show that the users are well aware that the girls, whose naked photos are shared without their consent, are underage. The links to file-sharing services are either sold by the user sending money through a mobile payment service or starting a subscription.

"When someone has an account on a certain website/app that others can pay to see. It could be nude pictures or something like that."

(BOY, AGE 15)



EACH DROPBOX contains thousands of images that are sorted into subfolders labelled with the girls' names. A folder normally contains hundreds of images and videos. Some of the videos are recorded by the perpetrator who, in addition to showing their own name on e.g. Snapchat, shows the username of the person who sent the photo and other girls who follow him. If the perpetrator, often a boy or man, is the owner of the account, he usually makes sure that he doesn't film his face if he is in the video. Often the girls have written messages in the photos or videos indicating that the person they sent them to is someone they trusted, using words such as "baby" or "I love you".

In other photos the girls write that they don't want to do it anymore or that what they are being forced to do is painful; that they are traumatised. Some ask to be allowed to stop. There are also messages where the girls ask the person not to take a screenshot of the content. If the perpetrator writes a message in the photos or videos, the language is often grossly misogynistic, with words such as "whore" or "slut" together with the name and contact information of the girls. The photos and videos that are shared through subscriptions or for other payment are in most cases taken from social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram. There are clear rules for how to share the material on the local expose accounts, as illustrated here.

The photos and videos that are shared through subscriptions or for other payment are in most cases taken from social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram.



What we have done

In 2022 ECPAT carried out the third story-based survey called *Nude Online*.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY was to study children's experiences, attitudes and strategies to manage sexual abuse, online and elsewhere, based on short stories created from other children's accounts of their experiences. In addition to the stories, the survey included three topics for deeper exploration. These were about children as victims of sexual offences on the internet, expose accounts where there is widespread sharing of naked and sexual content of children, as well as children's experiences of and attitudes to abuse where children are exploited by adults for the purchase of a sexual act. This report focuses on what children told us in the deeper dive into expose accounts, as well as three stories linked to this topic. In some cases we have included open-ended responses from the 2021 survey because it is through those responses that we realised the extent of the problem. We have also learnt about the nature of expose accounts from those who have contacted our Hotline.

Which children participated in the *Nude Online* survey?

The survey was conducted over a period of 12 days from the beginning of June 2022. The children were given information about it through a campaign on TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. By clicking on a link, they were directed to a page about the purpose of the survey, including information about ECPAT and ECPAT's helpline. The target group for the survey was children ages 10–17. There are children in the 10–12 age range on social media despite the age limit being 13.

The children were initially asked to respond to background questions about age, gender identity, which adults they lived with and if they and/or their parents were born in or outside Sweden. Children over the age of thirteen were asked if they had a neuropsychological diagnosis and if they identified as LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and asexual). Children up to the age of 13 were asked to respond to a maximum

of three stories randomly chosen from a selection of six stories. Children between 14 and 17 were asked to respond to three stories randomly chosen from a selection of 12 stories. The stories were, for example, about having photos shared without permission, selling nudes or being blackmailed online. In the stories there were children who had been victimised as well as children who had victimised other children. In the survey, the children were given the opportunity to participate in one or more deeper dive topics or to share their own story.

In the survey, 13,433 children responded to at least one story and the average was just over two stories responded to per child. The children got the chance to say whether they themselves or a friend had experienced anything similar to the events in the story. They also had a chance to share their comments in open-ended responses. Just over 2,500 children wrote at least one open-ended response and there were a total of 5,500 such responses, many of which were very long. 1,112 children responded to the deeper dive into expose accounts and 1,073 responded to questions about being a victim of a crime.

The majority of the children (around 75 percent) who responded to the survey were between the ages of 14 and 17. Just over half (52 percent) were girls

In the survey, 13,433 children responded to at least one story and the average was just over two stories responded to per child.

and 44 percent were boys. Just under 2 percent of the children were non-binary. Other children responded with either "other" or that they didn't want to state their gender identity. A large majority (81 percent) were born in Sweden and had parents who were also born in Sweden. 12 percent were born in Sweden but their parents were not. 6 percent were born outside Sweden as were their parents, and just under 1 percent were born outside Sweden and had parents who were born in Sweden. 60 percent of the children live with both of their parents and almost as many (18 and 17 percent respectively) either alternate between their parents or live with a single parent. Just over 5 percent stated that they do not live with either of their parents. Among the older children, 18 percent stated that they have a neuropsychological diagnosis such as autism or ADHD and 17 percent identify as LGBTQIA+. Among the children who identify as LGBTQIA+, more than twice as many girls (22 percent) stated this compared with boys (where 9 percent stated this).

Children's analysis of the survey – method

In the report we present quantitative results from the survey, and based on open-ended responses that many children provided, we were able to add more in-depth context to the children's responses and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and their thinking.

THIS BECOMES ESPECIALLY CLEAR when the topic is one in which the adult world has almost no insight. In many cases the children's descriptions speak for themselves and need no further interpretation. An important aspect of ECPAT's analysis process is interweaving the children's responses with information on laws and past research.

To gain a better understanding of the children's interpretations and solutions, ECPAT invited children to participate in the analysis process. The process was divided into two stages, the first of which involved six focus groups, each made up of students in grades 7 and 8. The groups consisted of six to 10 children and the girls and boys were divided into separate groups. The school's counsellor and a mentor were available if the children needed support. They also received information about ECPAT's helpline for children and young people.

We presented the results of our survey and asked the children to suggest what they themselves, the digital platforms, the judicial system and schools could do to reduce the number of expose accounts and the number of children being victimised. The children were asked to put their suggestions in order of priority based on what they thought the extent of the impact would be and how difficult the suggestion would be to implement. The children's suggestions were split into categories and all of the groups' assessments were combined into one prioritisation diagram, divided according to gender. The second stage involved upper secondary students discussing the results from the workshop.

In this group interview, the students discussed the pros and cons of the younger children's suggestions. The interview was transcribed and the children's points of view were presented with the results from the workshop.

What does the law say?

When children and young people describe the content in expose accounts they often use terms such as “nudes” or “naked pictures”.

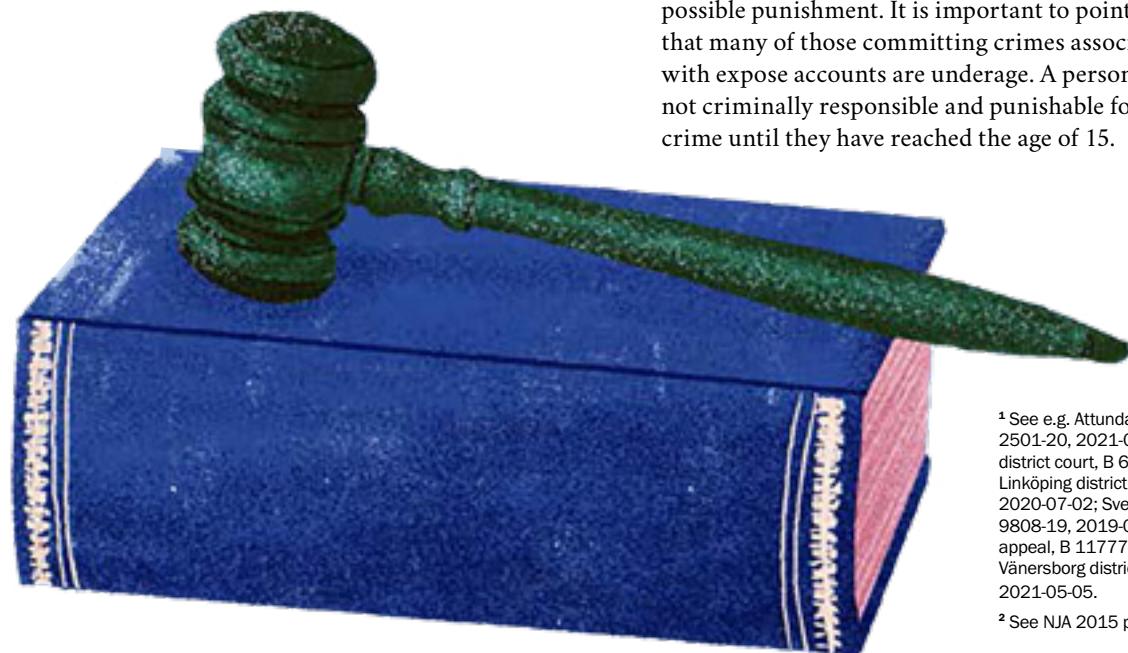
WHEN WE REVIEW THE MATERIAL that comes into the “Ditt ECPAT” helpline or to the online ECPAT Hotline, we see that what children call a naked photo or nude can be anything from an intimate photo that was taken in a mirror to a short video where the child penetrates themselves with a tool or with their fingers. There may also be videos or images that show physical intercourse and often the girl is filmed without it being possible to identify the boy in the shot. The majority of the material is produced by children themselves, which means that the child has taken the photo or recorded the video either willingly, under duress or after being blackmailed.

There are several different crimes that can be committed in connection with expose accounts. There are currently a few rulings where a court has tried a case regarding expose accounts

specifically. In these cases, the following offences were considered relevant: child pornography, defamation, unlawful threat and unlawful breach of privacy.¹

The fact that children and young people are being victimised online through image sharing and the spreading of rumours is not a new phenomenon. In 2013 in the so-called Instagram case which attracted a lot of attention, two girls were found guilty of defamation for creating and running an expose account. The supreme court upheld the district court’s ruling.² We will refer to this as well as other relevant crimes in this report. Note that the explanations below are non-exhaustive summaries of how different acts relating specifically to expose accounts could be applied to the various definitions of crime.

All the offences on the following pages have, in the most serious cases, a prison sentence as a possible punishment. It is important to point out that many of those committing crimes associated with expose accounts are underage. A person is not criminally responsible and punishable for a crime until they have reached the age of 15.



¹ See e.g. Attunda district court, B 2501-20, 2021-06-04; Helsingborg district court, B 634-20, 2020-11-03; Linköping district court, B 3566-19, 2020-07-02; Svea court of appeal, B 9808-19, 2019-08-28; Svea court of appeal, B 11777-20, 2020-12-01; and Vänersborg district court, B 3826-20, 2021-05-05.

² See NJA 2015 p. 482.

Child pornography offence

(Penal Code, Chapter 16 Section 10 a).

In principle all acts involving documented sexual abuse of children – what the law calls child pornography – are illegal. This means that it is illegal to, for example, produce, possess, spread or look at such materials. The term materials refers to photographs, video content etc. A child in this context is a person who has not yet reached the end of puberty, or where it is evident in the image or video and in the circumstances around it that the person is under the age of 18. The material is considered child pornography if it, for example, depicts sexual abuse of a child, focuses on the child’s genitalia or in another way has sexual subject matter.

Many of the images and videos on expose accounts can be considered child pornography. Often the age and/or name of the person is clearly visible in text over or next to the image. Uploading these images or videos or saving content from an expose account are examples of what can constitute a child pornography offence. Looking at naked or sexual images/videos of children may also be a criminal offence. If a person happens to see an expose account by mistake (e.g. if it pops up in a social media feed) this does not mean the person has committed a crime. On the other hand, if someone actively searches for an expose account that contains exploitative content or other sexual images/videos of children, they may have committed a child pornography offence.

Defamation

(Penal Code, Chapter 5 Sections 1–2)

The crime of defamation is where a person makes a so-called defamatory statement about another person for the purpose of disrespecting that person. It

does not matter whether the statement is true or not.

Posting a photo of someone on an expose account, including writing something about the person in the photo using the word “whore” or a similar term is an example of defamation.

Unlawful threat

(Penal Code, Chapter 4 Section 5)

Making an unlawful threat is a crime where someone behaves in a threatening manner so that the person being threatened is afraid for their own or another’s safety or life. The threat must be of committing an unlawful act.

Threatening someone with sharing their naked photos on an expose account is an example of an unlawful threat.

Unlawful coercion

(Penal Code, Chapter 4 Section 4)

The crime of unlawful coercion is where someone, through abuse or by threatening an unlawful act, forces a person to act in a certain way. This could be a threat of accusing or reporting someone for a crime, even if there is no basis for this.



Persuading a person to meet by threatening to otherwise share their photos on an expose account is an example of unlawful coercion. The same applies to threatening to share photos of a person on an expose account for the purpose of obtaining more images.

Unlawful breach of privacy

(Penal Code, Chapter 4 Section 6 a–b)

The crime of unlawful breach of privacy is where a person infringes upon another person’s private life by spreading certain types of private images or information for the purpose of causing serious harm. Both photos and videos are covered by the law, regardless of how they have been shared or disseminated. Images of a partially or fully naked body and details of a person’s sex life are examples of what is covered by the law.

Sending a naked photo of another person to an expose account without that person’s consent is an example of an unlawful breach of privacy.

Sexual molestation/sexual molestation of a child

(Penal Code, Chapter 6 Section 10)

The crime of sexual molestation or sexual molestation of a child is an act of a sexual nature that does not fall within the framework of any of the other sexual offences. These actions may be physical, verbal and/or visual.

Showing content on an expose account to someone who has not given their prior consent is an example of an act that can constitute sexual molestation of a child or sexual molestation. The same applies to instances where someone sends a link to an expose account, which the recipient opens, without the recipient having been informed about the content.

Current platforms and legislation

The EU determines much of the Swedish legislation on the liability of internet service providers and platforms for exploitative content that exists on their servers or services.

THE INTERNAL MARKET of the EU where there is free movement of services and capital etc. also includes digital services, and common regulations are therefore warranted. In order to ensure that the member states' laws align with each other, the EU defines minimum requirements that must be included in national legislation. At the time of writing of this report, the EU is working on regulations to achieve common legislation throughout the EU. The member states are not permitted to have laws that contravene the EU regulations. As Europe is one of the world's largest markets, this has great significance for the rest of the world as well.

Companies that offer space on servers to others, so-called hosting, are subject to the Swedish Electronic Commerce Act (2002:562).³ In this Act Sweden has adapted national law to align with the EU directive on electronic commerce.⁴ According to Section 18 of the Act, hosting companies are not culpable for illegal information that exists on their servers as long as the company is not aware that it is there (or, in terms of damages, is not aware of facts or circumstances that make it evident that illegal information is present). As soon as the company becomes aware of the information, it must immediately prevent it from being disseminated further.³ This could, for example, be done by deleting the files that contain the illegal information. The Act also requires companies to actively monitor what is placed on their servers. The obligation to act does not apply until the companies have actual knowledge of the illegal information. A company that continually ensures that exploitative content is immediately removed when it becomes aware of it is therefore not breaking the law, even though it can be argued that the company is aware that its service is constantly being used to store illegal information.

The platforms' liability with respect to messages that are spread through their services is regulated by the Swedish Bulletin Board System Act (1998:112), often called the BBS Act. An electronic bulletin board is considered to be "a service for electronic communication of messages". Hosting companies and web hosting services are also covered by the BBS Act.⁴ This involves messages that are published or target a group or a list that others can join. The law holds the platforms responsible for overseeing their services in such a way as required by how extensive the service is and the content that it has. In other words, a global social media platform may be required to do more than a small sports club. The platforms are also responsible for removing or preventing the dissemination of messages where the content is clearly associated with certain stated crimes, including a child pornography offence. Any platform that intentionally or through gross negligence violates the BBS Act is guilty of a crime that may be punishable by fines or up to two years in prison. The BBS Act stipulates what platforms and hosting companies can be held responsible for, while the Electronic Commerce



Act clarifies under which circumstances platforms and hosting companies are not liable.

It can be argued that a platform, by not removing or preventing dissemination of exploitative content of children for example, is guilty of a child pornography offence through a crime of omission. To be found guilty of a crime of omission, the actor must have been in a position where they had a duty to act, for example in the case of parents caring for their child or a duty to comply with an employment contract. In a case related to an incident of incitement against an ethnic or national group, the Supreme Court determined that liability under the BBS Act does not involve such a duty to act, that failure to remove content means a party can be found guilty of a crime.

It is not just these laws that determine a company's liability and ability to stop the spread of exploitative content involving children. The relevant industries are also self-regulating to some extent through guidelines and certifications. Companies also have control over which content they approve on their services through their user terms and conditions. For the large platforms, these terms and conditions for users are governed by US laws, as many of these companies have their head offices in the USA.

³ Harder, Sidsel Kirstine, et al. "Digital sexual violence: Image-based sexual abuse among Danish youth." Rape in the Nordic countries. Routledge, 2019. 205-223.
⁴ Mandau, Morten Birk Hansen. "Homosocial positionings and ambivalent participation: A qualitative analysis of young adults' non-consensual sharing and viewing of privately produced sexual images." *Mediekultur: Journal of media and communication research* 36.67 (2020): 055-075.

Children, the internet and relationships

The debate often focuses on the negative aspects of children's presence online and children as victims of crime.

IT IS IMPORTANT to remember why the internet is such an important part of children's lives and how they often use it in a more creative and social way than adults. Children use the internet for school work, entertainment and to hang out with friends or partners. Online, children find new friends, fall in love, explore their sexuality and search for information about sex and relationships. The line between what happens in the digital and physical worlds is also less clear to them than it is to adults. For children, the two worlds are largely interconnected.

One way to understand the positive aspects of sexual exploration and relationships online is to look at the three attitude questions we asked the children in our survey. The questions were about whether they thought the internet was a good place to flirt, if it was important in a romantic relationship and if it was a good way to find information about sex and relationships. Diagram 1 shows the percentage of children who responded that they entirely or partly agreed with the statements.

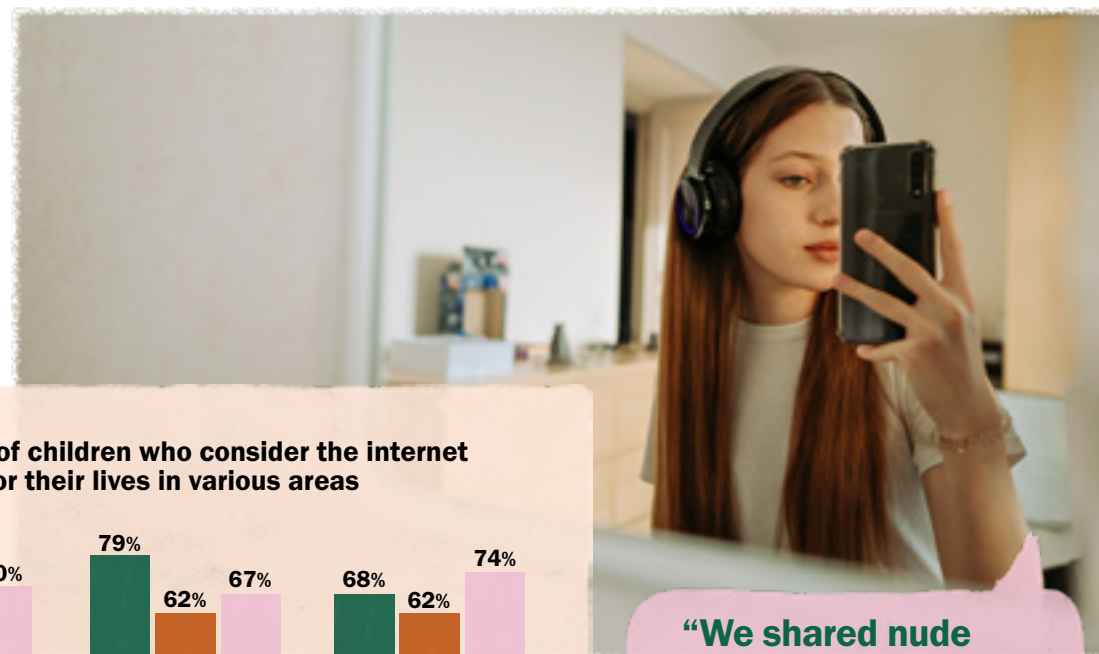
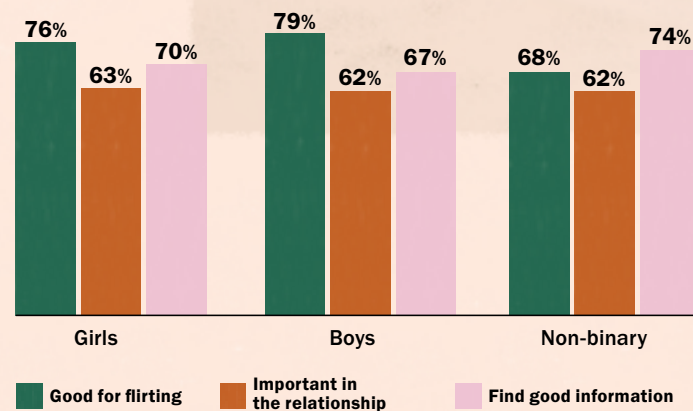


Diagram 1

Percentage of children who consider the internet to be good for their lives in various areas



"We shared nude pictures and enjoyed doing that, it was mutual and we had a good relationship."

(GIRL, AGE 16)

The majority of the children regarded the internet as something that could be fun, important and useful in romantic and sexual relationships. In many cases this leads to children exploring their sexuality online with partners, friends or strangers, or in brief flirtations. This often involved sending content they produced themselves in the form of naked photos or videos. In our 2021 survey almost half of the children said that they at some point had sent such content to another person and mainly to other children. In many cases this is not problematic and the children find it exciting, but sometimes something goes wrong and a trust is betrayed.

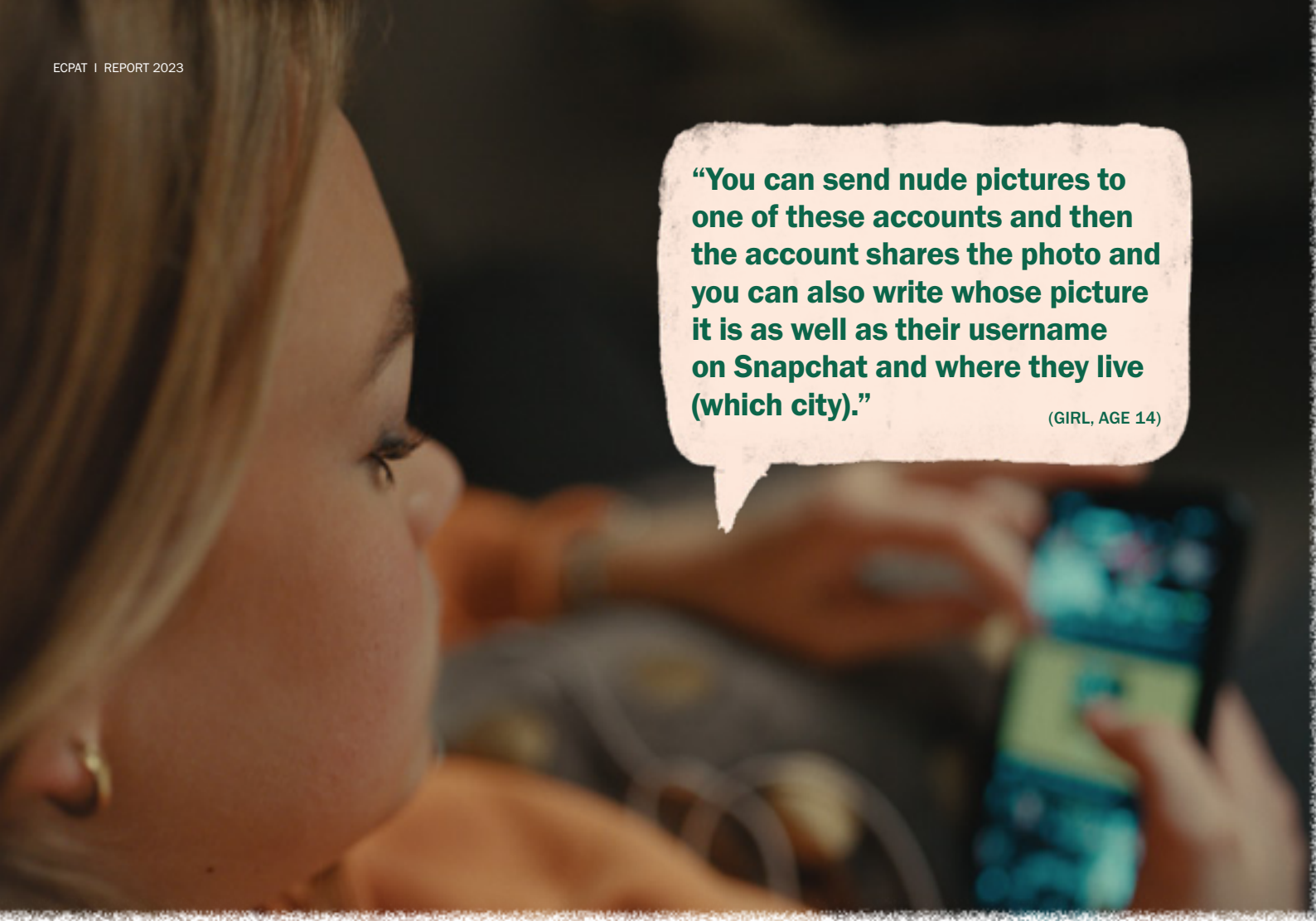


times for many years so that the child will be able to be tracked for a long time into the future. The survey indicates that exposing someone in this way can lead to verbal and physical harassment, exclusion, blackmail, threats and rape. Constant harassment has a very negative effect on a child's well-being. In the survey children said that they stopped going to school or going out at all. They also said they felt constantly anxious or depressed, engaged in self-harming or attempted suicide. Children have even told us that children they know have died by suicide because of being exposed and harassed.

We asked the children if they were aware of expose accounts, if they had visited these accounts

and why they think others do that. We found that almost all children ages 10–17 know what an expose account is and that a majority of them have visited at least one. If a child responded that they had visited an expose account we asked the follow-up question of why they did it. They state that the reason is it is exciting or fun, that they are curious about what everyone is talking about or that they are afraid they might have been exposed there. Also, about one in five children state that they have visited an expose account without knowing what it was because the platforms recommended that they follow the account. When children describe why they think others visit expose accounts, their reasons include creating drama, spreading hate, fear of being exposed and peer pressure. It is evident that the popularity of expose accounts depends on the local context, both as gossip and a bullying tool. Many responses also showed that children who visit expose accounts are actually critical of their existence. They try to minimise their own role by claiming they are not involved in the subsequent harassment and that they are just one of the many that go in to have a look

When children talk about exposure on the internet, a recurring theme is that their photos were shared at their school, in their town or municipality, and sent directly to partners, friends and family. In many cases the person who the photos were sent to is the same age as the child, often a partner or someone they were flirting with. These individuals have then posted the intimate photos on an expose account. Apart from the betrayal of trust and the harassment involved, the situation is made worse by the child's name, age, school and social media account being posted, making it possible for others to contact and harass the child victim year after year. Some expose accounts have huge amounts of named photos and videos. When we review the photos, which are often shared through links to a service such as Dropbox, we see that several of the victims appear repeatedly and are categorised in folders according to name. This may involve thousands of images. The child's personal information in combination with the large volume of photos means that the material may be leaked multiple



“You can send nude pictures to one of these accounts and then the account shares the photo and you can also write whose picture it is as well as their username on Snapchat and where they live (which city).”
 (GIRL, AGE 14)

“Where people ‘expose’ someone who has sent nudes or done something like that. Where the person’s name, age and sometimes school is named. Or where kids calls other kids bitches, whores or sluts.”
 (GIRL, AGE 14)

“I know what an expose account is. It’s where someone exposes others by taking a photo of them and writing personal things about them/it. I’ve seen an expose account but I’ve never been on one and hope I never will. I think it’s sick how people can do something like that to another person.” (Girl, age 14)

“Expose accounts are usually owned by some anonymous cowardly bastard. People send in nude pictures that they received from someone who chose to trust them. It can also be other things like secrets or something that’s none of their business but they feel the need to share just because they can.” (Girl, age 16)

In some cases there seem to be financial incentives to have an expose account, or the person behind the account requires visitors to submit their own content. These approaches reveal significant similarities with the forums where adult predators share sexual abuse material involving children and where all participants are committing a crime.

Something revealing in the children’s responses is that very few mention that much of the content is illegal. It is also evident that children do not realise that it may be a crime to share photos on expose accounts and also to visit them to look at naked photos of other children.

“They can send photos of anything. Some do it for money and write something like ‘Send SEK 200 and you’ll get photos.’” (Girl, age 14)

“To be able to follow and see posts you have to send in a nude picture of someone as a type of payment.”
 (BOY, AGE 17)



“An account where the account owner posts photos of other people, often nude pictures. Often also of kids. These accounts usually get hold of photos by demanding that people submit photos of others in order to be allowed to follow the account. Because many kids (often boys) find it very exciting, they submit photos of others. They can then follow the account and see more photos, and the account gets more photos to post.” (Boy, age 16)

“An account on, for example, Snapchat where an anonymous account collects nude pictures, often from girls. To be able to follow and see posts you have to send in a nude picture of someone as a type of payment.” (Boy, age 17)

Several of the children who responded to the question about what an expose account is, also reject the phenomenon.

How do children define expose accounts?

When the children were asked what an expose account is, 89 percent of those who responded stated that they know what it is. The majority said that the accounts are used to spread secrets and naked photos of people.

“An expose account is where a person or several people have an account and they have photos of naked people, violence, rape, etc. and they send the photos or videos to people or put them in their stories.” (Girl, age 14)

“It’s an account that someone sends photos to, such as nude pictures, but they also say who the photo is of and give other information. Then the expose account shares the photos and information with as many people as possible. The photos can be posted in stories or be shared individually.” (Girl, age 15)

A recurring theme is that visitors to the accounts create a malignant atmosphere and that the people exposed are verbally degraded in comment threads and in the photos. The comments are often sexist or aimed at shaming the exposed girls. Sometimes others are encouraged to contact them.

In addition to sharing their own content, there is also content that shows abuse.

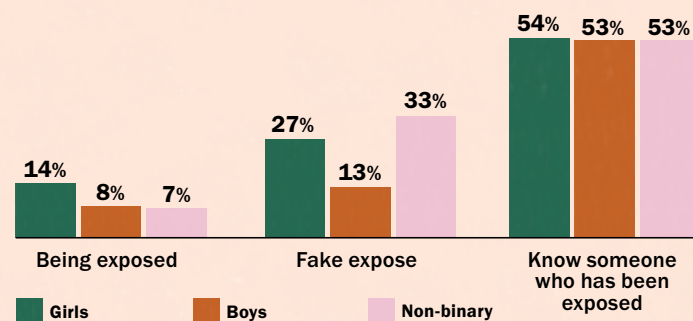
“Where people share photos of people and write mean things. Like in Gothenburg where they posted photos of a girl and said she’d had sex with so and so and that she’s a filthy whore.” (Girl, age 14)

How common is it to be exposed?

Diagram 2 shows children's experience of being exposed on an expose account or knowing someone who has been exposed.

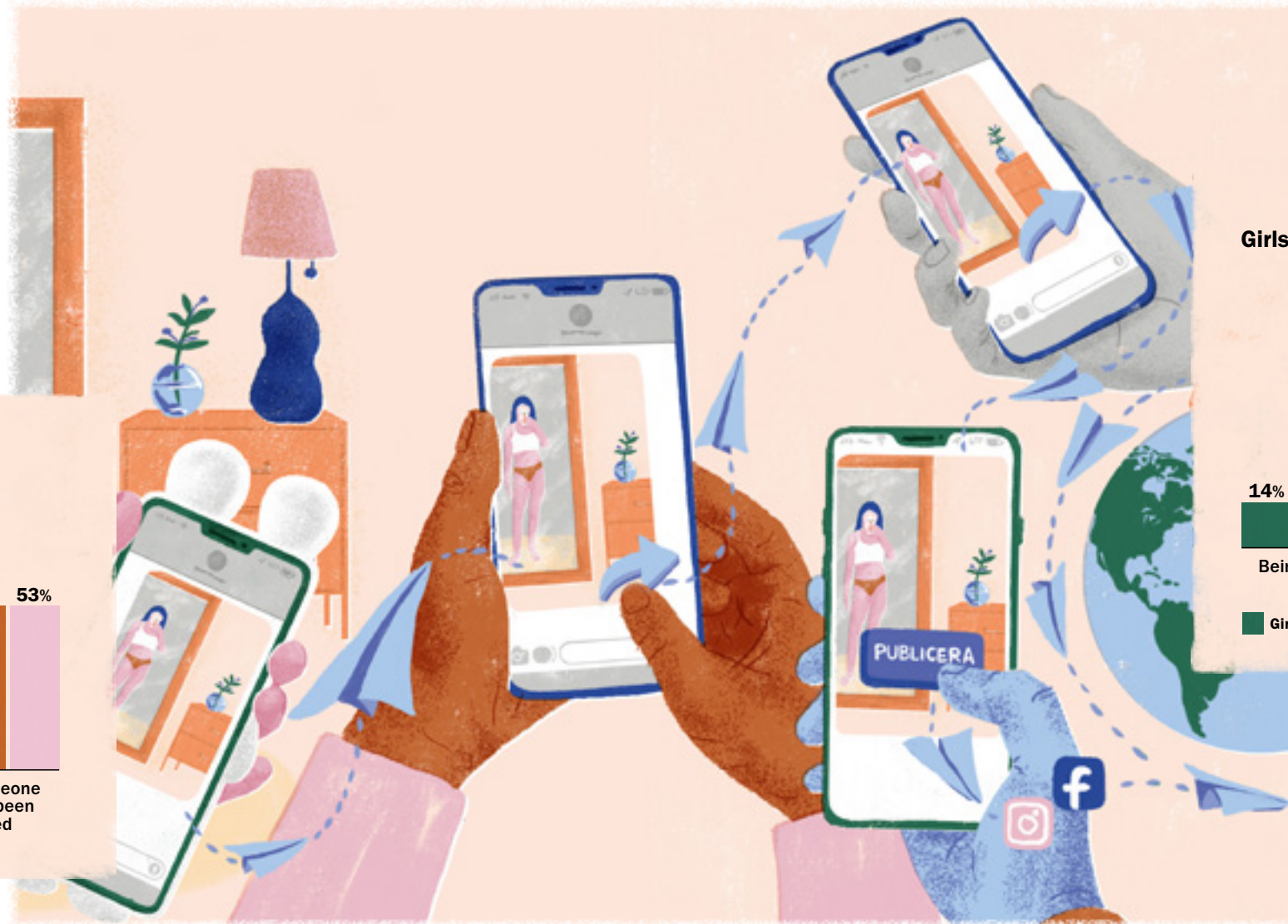
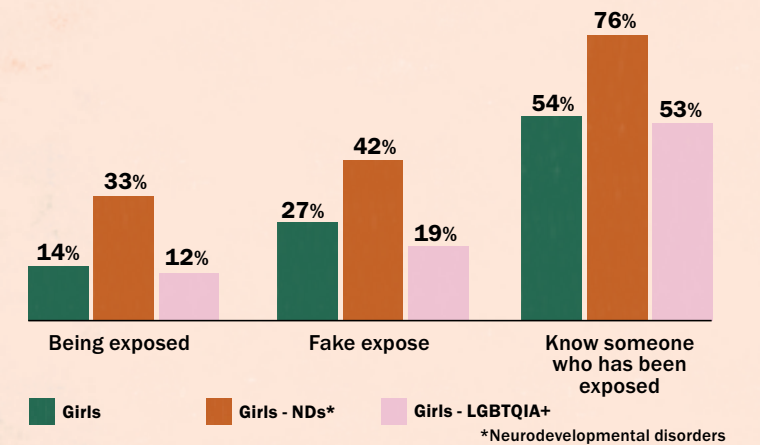
Diagram 2

Children's experience of being exposed



Girls experience of being exposed

Diagram 3



CLOSE TO ONE IN SIX GIRLS and just under one in ten boys and non-binary individuals have experienced their intimate photos being posted on an expose account. It is even more common for fake images to be posted and linked to a child without it actually being a photo of them. One in four girls, one in six boys and one in three non-binary individuals have experienced this type of exposure that can, in many ways, be just as serious. Finally, we are seeing that just over half of the children, regardless of gender identity, know someone who has been exposed, which shows that children who have not been exposed themselves are also well

aware that the accounts exist and that for many they are a potential and constant threat. This threat is very real. One girl in the survey describes it like this:

“These photos and rumours can destroy someone’s whole social life so you can’t just dismiss it as being ‘a bit embarrassing’.
Because there’s a lot at stake.”
 (GIRL, AGE 17)

For non-binary individuals, the main difference between having been exposed by your own or someone else’s photos being shared also points to another function of these accounts. It appears that people who own the accounts decide to punish children who do not conform to the heterosexual norm by outing them on the expose account. To gather more information on other groups who do not conform to a norm and are more vulnerable to cyberbullying, we took a closer look at children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and those with a neurodevelopmental diagnosis. When we divided the material up between children

with a neuropsychological diagnosis and children who identify as LGBTQIA+, this vulnerability became even more pronounced for all of them except girls who identify as LGBTQIA+. One in three girls with a diagnosis have had photos of them shared and just over 40 percent have been linked to images that are not of them. Three in four girls with a neuropsychological diagnosis also know someone who has been exposed.

In the case of boys, there are small differences in which boys have had images of them shared on an expose account, but it is twice as common for boys with a diagnosis to be linked to other people’s photos and three times as common for boys who identify as LGBTQIA+. It is also slightly more common for boys with a diagnosis and boys who identify as LGBTQIA+ to know someone who has been exposed. One in four girls with a neuropsychological diagnosis also knows someone who has been exposed.

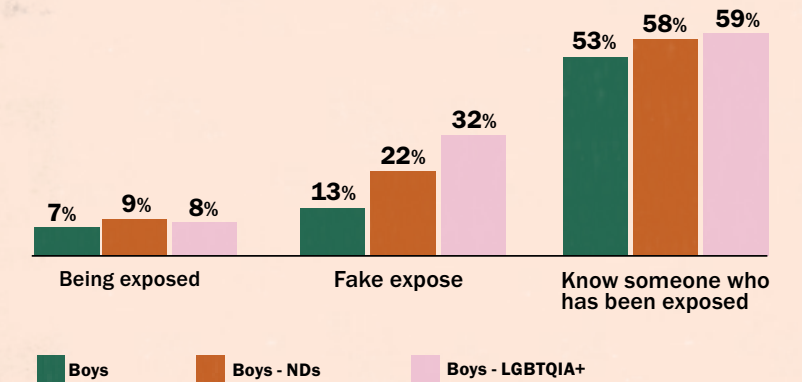


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Diagram 4

Boys experience of being exposed



The statistics show that the risk of being exposed is not the same for all children and that children who in some way deviate from the norm have an increased risk of being linked to content on expose accounts. This mainly applies to images and videos that are not actually of the child.

This can be interpreted such that local expose accounts, despite the fact that they often consist of naked and sexual content, are more about systematic harassment of the person who is exposed than sexual interest in the exposed person.

Who exposes children?

We do not know much about which children share naked photos of other children. The research that exists indicates that there are two common denominators, particularly among boys, namely poor impulse control and high-risk behaviour.³

AT THE SAME TIME as this behaviour has spread and become normalised, the threshold for sharing seems to have been lowered and more and more children are participating in it. This is happening even though the children are often aware that is it morally wrong to share these types of photos.⁴ If a perpetrator is held responsible for sharing content without consent, it is common for them to blame the victim. Their reasoning includes that the victim sent the content to them or that the victim did something bad in a relationship and now they only have themselves to blame for the content being shared.⁵

Several of the children who have been victimised on expose accounts say that they sent the photos or videos in confidence but that something changed in their relationship with the person who then shared the photos.

"I did it because we trusted each other and I also received photos, but when I stopped sending them and blocked him, it wasn't good because he shared the photos."

(GIRL, AGE 16.)

³ Harder, Sidsel K., and Amy A. Hasinoff. "Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing imagebased sexual abuse." *First Monday* (2021).

⁴ Ringrose, Jessica, Katilyn Regehr, and Sophie Whitehead. "'Wanna trade?': Cisheteronormative homosocial masculinity and the normalization of abuse in youth digital sexual image exchange." *Journal of Gender Studies* 31.2 (2022): 243-261.

"I was about 10, just got Snapchat and was messaging a guy and he would send some photos back, but usually his were of his stomach and mine where more nude. He saved the photo and then exposed me after we broke up. He was helped by a woman who lived in my shitty neighbourhood."

(GIRL, AGE 16.)



"It was awful. I was 12. I trusted him too, but he sent the photos to an account on Snapchat called 'Nudesexposeswe' or something like that. I think the police should do more about this type of thing and Snapchat should take down these accounts."

(GIRL, AGE 13)

In some cases the actions seem to have been planned. One reason for this could be that sharing new content raises a person's status in a group. There may also be a norm whereby boys in groups are expected to share naked images of girls and it's seen as a natural thing to do.⁶

"I was 14 and was constantly being asked by this guy for photos. In the end he threatened me so I sent them. He took screenshots of the photos and posted them on a sharing site. I felt really bad about it and I was ashamed so I never reported it, which I should have done, but I felt it was my fault that I'd sent a photo of my body to someone. I regret that I was afraid to tell an adult or report it to the police!" (Girl, age 16)

"A boy who'd already been exposed/ bullied at school sent a nude in a group chat because he thought it would be cool (like shock humour). He was going to delete it but he didn't have time before people started downloading it. Then it was being shared at school and on Discord and it seemed to make him feel worse. Just about everyone knew about it and a lot of people had seen it."

(BOY, AGE 17)

In other cases the intention is to harass a person who has already been exposed. This again shows that there is a connection between bullying (both cyberbullying and in other contexts) and being exposed.

"It was my friend who sent nudes to a guy and he took a screenshot of the photo and shared it to a so-called expose account and tagged her Snapchat, city and age." (Girl, age 15)

"The guys in my class shared photos of my friend (a girl) to our whole school." (Girl, age 17)



“It was a boy in my class. He was messaging a girl who’s my friend. He was being unfaithful because he was asking other girls, including me, for photos and if I wanted a photo of him. His girlfriend found out about it because I told her, and then in revenge she asked for a photo from him and then she shared the photos and showed them to other people. I’ve seen the photo.”

(GIRL, AGE 15)

IT IS CLEAR THAT PHOTOS are being shared by both boys and girls without consent. Although it is more common for those who have been exposed to say that a boy was behind it, there are many examples of girls sharing photos as well. Research suggests that there is a fairly even gender split between those who share without consent, while those whose photos are shared are more often girls.⁷ One difference between boys’ and girls’ sharing seems to be that girls are more likely to share photos of people of the same sex and that the photos are less likely to have been sent within what the victim considers to be a relationship. This often happens as a means of checking out another person’s sexual behaviour and punishing those who break with norms.⁸

“A couple of girls in my class created a fake account on Instagram. A boy in the class was tricked into sending nudes to the account and then they shared them with their friends.” (Girl, age 16)

“Not really the same thing, but one of her friends filmed her when she was in the shower, without her consent, and shared the video all over the internet.” (Girl, age 15)

“My nude pictures are being shared right now by a girl but she’s only sharing mine and not the guy’s. He sent them as well. It always happens to us girls and it’s us who are always teased and commented on.” (Girl, age 17)

A common reason why girls share photos is to take revenge, either on a partner or someone they think their partner has been unfaithful with. The revenge motive is not mentioned at all in the accounts of why boys share photos. In a few cases children talked about their own experiences of sharing. This revealed that children who share content are not always aware of the consequences of their actions and that they feel regret afterwards.

“I was stupid to share and I realised afterwards how f*** immature and evil it is. I would be devastated if photos of me were shared,”**

(GIRL, AGE 17)

⁷ Naezer, Marijke, and Lotte van Oosterhout. “Only sluts love sexting: Youth, sexual norms and non-consensual sharing of digital sexual images.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 30.1 (2021): 79-90.

⁸ Naezer, Marijke, and Lotte van Oosterhout. “Only sluts love sexting: Youth, sexual norms and non-consensual sharing of digital sexual images.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 30.1 (2021): 79-90.





IN ONE OF OUR ANALYSIS GROUPS, personal conflicts were seen as a reason to share photos. The goal was to degrade the person whose photos were exposed. They don't regard sharing naked photos as being related to a specific gender either, because it is more about a way to harm someone than an act of a sexual nature.

"I thought there would be more girls sharing because girls like to talk about other people and put them down in order to feel better themselves. I understand that guys do this sort of thing because they're angry or feel they have something to prove to their friends, that's why they share them." (Girl, analysis group)

"If they've been arguing with each other they want to do everything to bring the other person down, make them feel bad, and then gender doesn't matter." (Boy, analysis group)

Through the responses it also became clear that sharing is not something that just happens on one occasion, and that many children are involved in spreading of the images further.

"My best friend sent photos to a guy at my school. He shared them with one of my other friends and that's when it all started. He shared them too and by the next day, the whole school had seen them. They'd seen the photos and shared them with others."

(GIRL, AGE 15)

"There are no consequences. There should be consequences because it can destroy someone's life if nude pictures of them are shared."

(GIRL, ANALYSIS GROUP)

"Someone took photos of me half naked and then posted them on social media and the people who saw them also shared them." (Girl, age 15)

"If you have a grudge against someone and can get hold of photos, you can shame them more. You want to insult them and it's a lot about degrading and bullying." (Boy, analysis group)

"If girls don't like each other they can be really mean to each other. That's when they share photos with others." (Girl, analysis group)

The children in the analysis groups think that other children aren't always aware that spreading the photos is a crime. They describe it as being so common that essentially no one takes it seriously.

They think that the underlying reasons for sharing photos of others are that the people doing it have a problem with themselves or that they lack consequential thinking skills.

"A person must be in bad shape mentally if they degrade someone like that." (Girl, analysis group)

Gender and exposure

In our survey we asked children if they thought it was worse for girls to be exposed on an expose account than for boys.

AROUND SIX IN TEN of the girls thought it was worse for girls, almost four in ten thought it was about the same for girls and boys and less than 1 percent of children thought it was worse for boys to be exposed. The responses from the boys differed to some extent. Almost half thought it was equally bad for the person who is exposed regardless of gender, almost four in ten thought it was worse for girls and just under one in ten thought it was worse for boys.

Of those who chose to add a comment to their response, several emphasised that gender did play a role in how exposure affected the person. In their responses they did, however, stress that exposure is difficult for everyone.

"I don't think that boys care as much about photos of them being shared because after it happens, girls are shamed more than boys. Maybe it's the macho culture and the fact that girls aren't supposed to do this sort of thing, and they're considered to be dirtier if they do it."

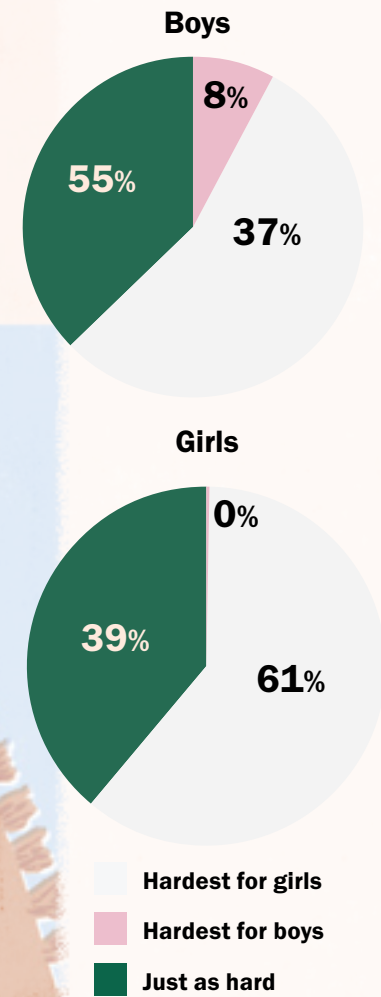
(GIRL, ANALYSIS GROUP)

"I think it's very much the same, but with current norms it's probably worse for girls because they get called whore and other names, while a lot of boys mainly get compliments about it, but otherwise it's the same."

(GIRL, AGE 15)



Diagram 6



THERE ARE, HOWEVER, others who respond that it is not necessarily about how bad the experience is. It can also depend on how the person who was exposed handles what happened to them.

In the non-binary group and those with another gender identity, about the same number think it is just as bad for everyone as it is for girls to be exposed. (No one in these groups thought it was worse for boys.) There are also some who think that the question was asked in the wrong way.

One of the non-binary individuals points out that there are things other than gender that affect people, and another child would have liked the question to be asked in broader sense.

"I think it's a bit worse for girls but I think this is because girls talk out about it more. I think boys sometimes suffer in silence when it comes to certain things."
(Girl, age 17)

"Maybe it's because boys don't want to seem vulnerable, whereas girls think that it's easier to handle their emotions if they share things with someone else."
(Girl, analysis group)

"It's probably just as bad for everyone. But I was thinking that it must be really bad for those who identify as non-binary or trans as well."

(OTHER GENDER IDENTITY, AGE 13)



The children's responses match the research in this area. The research shows unequivocally that girls are more vulnerable than boys after naked photos of them have been shared.⁹ Due to gender roles, while girls are blamed for their sexuality and for sending photos,

the same actions by boys tend to be jokingly dismissed.¹⁰ It is important to remember that even joking can be painful, and norms about masculinity may result in boys being less willing to talk about what they've been through and to seek help.¹¹

⁹ See for example Brännström, Lotta, Sara Nyhlén, and Katja Gillander Gådin. "You are so ugly, you whore"-girls in rural Sweden discuss and address gendered violence." *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being* 15.1 (2020): 1695308 och Ringrose, Jessica, Katilyn Regehr, and Sophie Whitehead. "Wanna trade?": Cisheteronormative homosocial masculinity and the normalization of abuse in youth digital sexual image exchange." *Journal of Gender Studies* 31.2 (2022): 243-261.

¹⁰ Ringrose, Jessica, Katilyn Regehr, and Sophie Whitehead. "Wanna trade?":

Cisheteronormative homosocial masculinity and the normalization of abuse in youth digital sexual image exchange." *Journal of Gender Studies* 31.2 (2022): 243-261 och Hunehall Berndtsson, Kristina, and Ylva Odenbring. "They don't even think about what the girl might think about it": Students' views on sexting, gender inequalities and power relations in school." *Journal of Gender Studies* 30.1 (2021): 91-101. ¹¹ Hunehall Berndtsson, Kristina. "Something You Just Don't Talk About": An Analysis of Teenage Boys' Experiences of Non-Consensual Sexting in Lower Secondary School." *The Journal of Men's Studies* (2021): 10608265211042794.

The consequences of being exposed

Children who have been exposed describe that the way people around them react after the photos have been shared is the hardest thing to deal with.

ALTHOUGH CHILDREN generally think that it is OK to send nude pictures, those whose photos have been exposed say they get harassed and shamed by others because they sent the images that were then shared without their consent. When photos are shared in the children's own social networks many of them get harassed at school and during the school day. The children's responses showed that school staff members are either unaware about what is going on or are unable to prevent the harassment.

"My photos were shared on lots of expose accounts and my name, the city where I live, my age and which school I go to were included with each one. There were loads of expose accounts and it never ends. I also had a really hard time at school because I was discriminated against—everything from the photos, to people commenting, showing others photos of me when I was right next to them in class, shouting things in the corridors, holding the nude pictures up right in my face and talking about it all the time. I was completely devastated." (Girl, age 16)

"When I was 13 I was going out with a guy who was 15. I didn't think it felt right so I decided to break up with him. Then he threatened to share my photos on an expose account and with my family. Of course I never thought he would do it so I just ignored it. The next day I woke up and saw that several accounts had tagged me in an Instagram post and there were the photos of me! My family also got the photos but they supported me through it all anyway. I really couldn't go to school and barely wanted to be seen outside because I was so ashamed. It was as if this guy had turned everyone against me." (Girl, age 15)

"I've sent photos that someone saved and now my whole school has seen them. I get called all sorts of names so I don't go to school anymore. I can't even go outside without someone shouting things at me."

(GIRL, AGE 17)

It is not just people who go to the same school that participate in the harassment. People the child thought were friends can change their attitude following an exposure. This creates a feeling of shame and guilt which makes it harder to seek support in the adult world or report the person who has harassed them.¹² This can lead to a culture of silence around the platforms and it can be hard for the adult world to find a way in. Comments from the adult world often indicate that they consider the victims to be partly to blame if they sent naked photos of themselves in the first place.¹³

"Boys that I hung out with spread rumours and said things to me like 'whore' and 'You're just a whore anyway so why should you care'. After that I tried everything to stop thinking about it but in the end I tried to kill myself a couple of times and now, about two years later, I still think about it every day. Just a week ago I heard that another person I know saw the photo. I tried everything to stop thinking about it. I've pushed it down but it still hurts. Imagine if I find a guy

that I'm planning everything with and he gets to see it and then just thinks he's together with a whore, or if my family are contacted and see the comments that their daughter has used her body in that way. I regret it more than anything, but there's nothing I can do about it..." (Girl, age 16)

"Their sex videos were shared all over our town and that's when it became hell for her. I think she was raped a number of times by the same person. He thought it didn't make any difference because she'd already acted like a 'whore.' She got a lot of DMs of guys masturbating to her sex video. That was the day she tried to kill herself for the first time. But she attempted suicide again and again. One day she couldn't take all the shit so she ended her life. From that day on my friends care a lot about who I message because they don't want to lose me as well." (Girl, age 14)

It is not only schools that are failing to adequately protect children, the children also describe problems getting justice, even in instances where the perpetrator is known and where the harassment has gone on for a long time.

"I was with a guy from Snapchat after we'd talked on the phone and stuff for a year or so but then he started to push me more and more to send nude pictures and then he leaked my nude pictures online. I was 12 and he was 18. I reported him to the police several times but the investigation was dropped. That was about four years ago and he's still sharing my nude pictures. I need help but I don't know where to turn. After reporting it five times to the police I gave up." (Girl, age 16)



"I was 12 and he was 18. I reported him to the police several times but the investigation was dropped."

(GIRL, AGE 16)

¹² Mandau, Morten Birk Hansen. "'Snaps', 'screenshots', and self-blame: A qualitative study of image-based sexual abuse victimization among adolescent Danish girls." *Journal of Children and Media* 15.3 (2021): 431-447.

¹³ Karaian, Lara. "Policing 'sexting': Responsibilization, respectability and sexual

subjectivity in child protection/crime prevention responses to teenagers' digital sexual expression." *Theoretical Criminology* 18.3 (2014): 282-299 och Dobson, Amy Shields, and Jessica Ringrose. "Sex education: pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyards of Tagged and Exposed." *Sex Education* 16.1 (2016): 8-21.

"I think social media should be more aware of who creates accounts and what they post in their accounts."

(GIRL, AGE 16)

EVEN IN CASES where a child has sought and received support, they are often uncertain if the photos are really gone or if they might show up again in a new account. The victimised children often feel that the platforms where the accounts are created and the photos are posted are irresponsible.

"There's a lot that needs to be said to understand what happened to me. It's not possible to say it in a few words. Anyway, I went to see a counsellor who helped me to report what had happened to me to the police and I also got to meet a lawyer who helped me to get the account that someone had created to share naked photos of me and pretend it was me that owned it taken down. Now the account is gone. But it's really easy to just create a new account. I think social media should be more aware of who creates accounts and what they post in their accounts." (Girl, age 16)

The lack of support from the adult world results in some children trying to resolve the situation themselves, for example by contacting the parents of the person sharing the photos or by threatening to go to the police.

"My ex had saved several nude pictures of both me and other girls and then sent them to an expose account on Snapchat in exchange for money. I noticed it when about 25 guys added me to Snapchat and wrote things and then I saw what had happened. What I did was to contact his mum and without hesitation I wrote to her about what had happened and that I wouldn't report it to the police if she talked to her son." (Girl, age 17)



"My ex (he was a man, but I became a lesbian so luckily I don't have to deal with that stuff now) posted photos of me on an expose account and it took a few weeks before people started talking about them, but sometimes people still add me and share the photos and try to make me send more as if I'm still the 12 year old in the photos. My go-to move is to take a screenshot showing that they've sent it and then of the police website about child pornography, and then I tell them that because they have photos of a naked 12 year old, I'm fully justified in reporting them. Often the accounts are anonymous so I just have to take a screenshot of a profile and lie that the police can find the IP address. I act like I'm certain about it so they usually panic and delete their accounts :)" (Girl, age 17)

"I sent 'undressed' photos to my disgusting ex who was then 17 and I was 12. I broke up with him because he was a total mental case. Photos that I'd only sent to him ended up on an anonymous Snapchat account called boråsexpose with my Snap tagged. This is the only time I've visited an expose account and I did it to threaten to go to the police because of the child pornography law." (Girl, age 17).

Some children say that they don't find being exposed particularly unpleasant and that they try to approach the situation with pragmatism or humour instead.

"My nude pictures were leaked several times on Snapchat stories and were viewed by thousands of people but, to be honest, I don't care. You can't see my

face and I'm dressed like I would be at the beach. If people want to look at my body in a sexual way, that's not my fault. I'm 15 now and I was 14 when the photos were leaked. My bum looks as good in reality as in the photo, so if someone thinks the photo is something special, it's not surprising." (Girl, age 15)

"My best friend has been exposed several times. It wasn't such a big deal and she got over it. No one talks about it anymore and they think it's all OK now!" (Girl, age 14)

It is clear that some children who have been exposed or have friends who have been exposed blame those who sent the photos rather than themselves. This reaction often takes a long time for them to arrive at and requires the child to learn to handle the initial shame and guilt from being exposed.¹⁴

"My friend's nude pictures were shared on Snapchat and I feel sorry for her that it happened because she only sent them to one person not to a bunch of people, and people who share them are immature little rats who think they're cool when they're really just the scum of Sweden. Ugh, I hate people like that." (Girl, age 16, Nude Online 2021)

"What's done is done and you can't actually do anything about it. Also, it's common to take these kinds of photos; there's nothing weird about me sending them when we were a couple. Everyone has a body and I promise you that most of my friends have sent photos to boys. It's not a big deal really."

(GIRL, AGE 17)

¹⁴ Mortensen, Signe Uldbjerg. "Defying shame: shame-relations in digital sexual assault." *Mediekultur: Journal of media and communication research* 36.67 (2020): 100-120.

Children who visit expose accounts

Children who have had their photos or videos shared on expose accounts describe how the feeling that everyone may have seen them is one of the hardest things to deal with. It is important to look into which children are visiting expose accounts and why they visit them.

AS WE HAVE INDICATED in a previous section, those who visit the accounts do not just look at the images; many of them go on to harass, bully, threaten or blackmail the children in the photos. Sometimes they save the photos and share them in other places. Research sometimes describes the attraction of expose accounts as "visual gossip."¹⁵ Many children also use words such as "gossip" or "drama" to describe it. It is, however, important to remember that what happens on expose accounts is a serious crime that targets children, and that the visitors to these forums are often committing a crime.

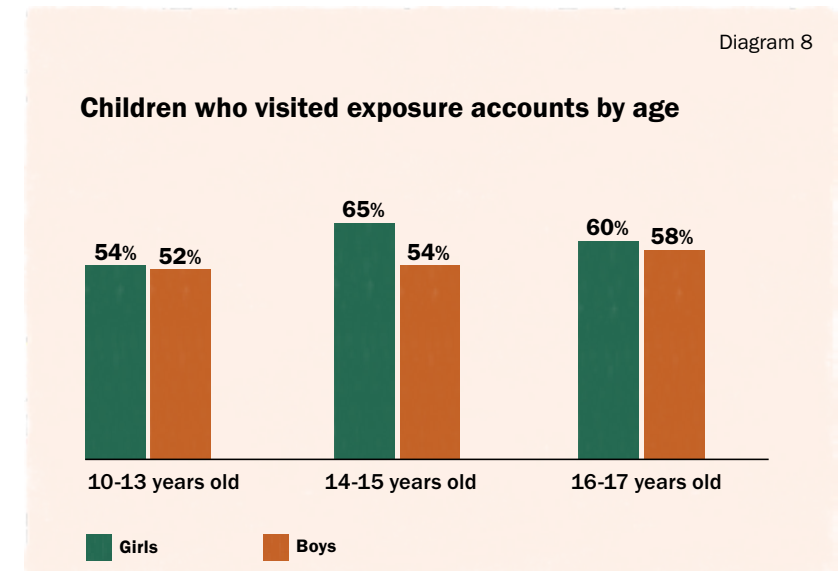
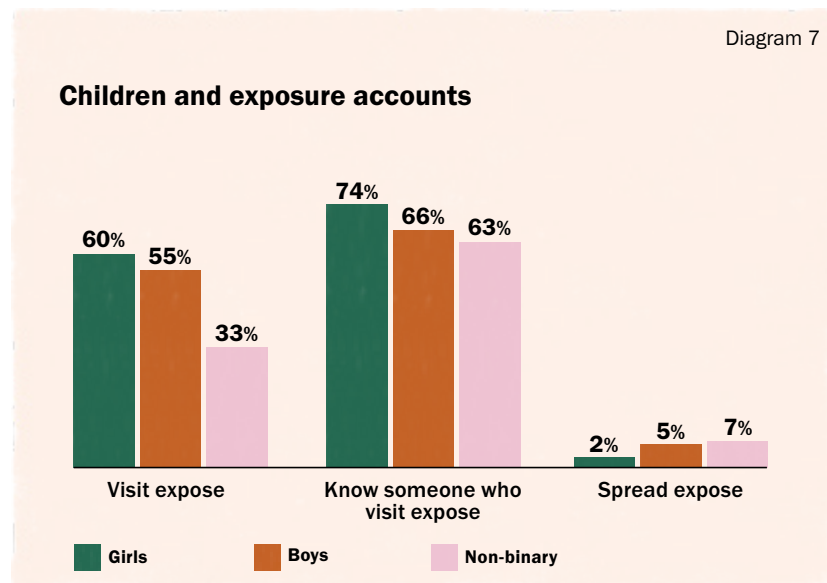
If we look at the diagram below we see that almost 60 percent of the children have visited an

expose account and even more know someone else who has. In both cases there are more girls than boys. Far fewer non-binary individuals have visited an expose account. Among the children who have visited an expose account, regardless of age and gender identity, about one third have visited several different accounts. However, it is unusual for children to admit that they have shared photos on an expose account. Only 2 percent of girls and 7 percent of non-binary individuals say that they have done so. From those who have contacted the helpline, we know that images that were initially shared privately between children often end up on an expose account, despite the fact that this was not the original intention.



"I've become stronger and I don't give a shit if some immature guy thinks that no one has ever seen a girl's body before and feels the need to show the photo to everyone."

(GIRL, AGE 17)



If we divide girls and boys (the number of non-binary is too small to be relevant here) into age groups, we see that girls in age group 14–15 are those who are most likely to have visited one or more expose accounts. Among boys, the percentage who have visited expose accounts increases with their age. However, it is worth noting that more than half of the children in age group 10–13 have also visited these accounts.

¹⁵ Bindsbøl Holm Johansen, Katrine, Bodil Maria Pedersen, and Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen. "Visual gossiping: Non-consensual 'nude' sharing among young people in Denmark." Culture, health & sexuality 21.9 (2019): 1029-1044.

Why do children visit expose accounts?

IT IS IMPORTANT to understand that children's incentives vary greatly in the different categories. Those who visit an expose account because they have been exposed themselves are often trying to protect themselves or a friend. Even if their visit increases traffic to the site, reports may lead to the platform taking down the accounts. Those who go into the accounts often do it without knowing what they contain and are attracted by the fact that the account has been visited by their friends. Their reaction when they see the content is often negative. Several children also say that they have reported an account and that they are angry with the platforms for not being aware of what content is published and shared.¹⁶



We asked the children why they visited an expose account and divided their responses into the following categories:

Friends

Their friends showed or encouraged them to visit an account.



Platforms

The platforms recommended an account or information about an account appeared in their feed.

Worry

The children were worried that they themselves or their friends had been exposed and/or they wanted to report the account to the platform.



Curiosity

They were curious and thought it was fun.

Excitement/arousal

The material was seen as exciting, authentic and more interesting than porn.

Other

In this final category the dominant answer was that the children had not considered whether it might be problematic. The most common response in this category was "Why not?"

In the diagram we see how boys and girls state the reason they visited one or more expose accounts. We see both similarities and differences in the responses of the girls and boys. The differences between boys and girls are small in two cases: those who say that friends encouraged them (about one in ten children) and those who say that the platforms' algorithms recommended the account (around one in five children) and also "Other" (just over one in twenty children). The big differences are above all in the number that were worried they had been exposed on an account. More than a quarter of girls cite worry as the reason, compared with one in ten boys. One in six boys compared with fewer than one in 100 girls state that they do it to become sexually aroused. Among both girls and boys the most common response is that they do it out of curiosity or because it is fun.

"You want to know what's happening, especially if it's happening in your neighbourhood." (Girl, age 14)

What this rough categorisation does not capture is that curiosity increases when the accounts are local and the children recognise the people in the photos. Expose accounts can be seen as a form of visual gossip – something that many children talk about, and visiting them is important to avoid being on the outside.

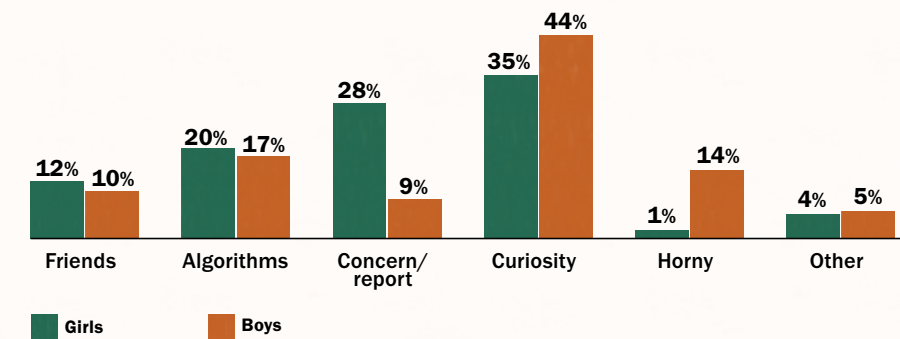
"When it happened at my school, everyone went in because it was a weird account that had added everyone at school as friends. Everyone was curious about what it was about so you just click and see everything." (Boy, age 17)

"It was popular and you want to keep up with what's going on, often drama and stuff like that."

(GIRL, AGE 16)

Diagram 9

Why did I (the child) visit one or more exposure accounts



¹⁶ Mandau, Morten Birk Hansen. "Homosocial positionings and ambivalent participation: A qualitative analysis of young adults' non-consensual sharing and viewing of privately produced sexual images." *MedieKultur:Journal of media and*

communication research 36.67 (2020): 055-075 and Harder, Sidsel Kirstine. "The emotional bystander—sexting and imagebased sexual abuse among young adults." *Journal of Youth Studies* 24.5 (2021): 655-669.

Many of the children who have visited expose accounts express some moral ambivalence about their own behaviour. Several describe that it was something they did before they realised it was wrong. This ambivalence is a known factor from past research. Even children who think it is basically wrong to share photos and visit the forums seldom react to the actual sharing.

“I was young and it came up on the Snapchat account I had at the time. But I changed my mind and the person encouraged me to send photos to others. I didn’t do it because it’s stupid and I don’t exchange photos with people so I didn’t have anything.”

(GIRL, AGE 17)

The moral ambivalence can be about how the visitor reacts – both when visiting the platform and in their thought process afterwards. It is clear that certain children who visit expose accounts do not see it as problematic as long as they’re only looking and not commenting. But visiting an expose account means that the child is part of the spreading of content. Regardless of whether they comment or not, the addition of more visitors adds to the exposed child’s feeling that everyone has seen the photos.

“Because it was fun. I didn’t do anything bad.”
(Girl, age 11)

“It seemed interesting to know what people were up to. But I never tease or bully people because they ended up there.” (Boy, age 15)

“Exciting but still not much fun for the person being exposed.” (Boy, age 15)

“When I was younger it was fun to look because none of my friends thought it was wrong or immoral.”

(GIRL, AGE 17)

Some of the children who visited expose accounts based on recommendations from friends or because functions on the platform encouraged them to go to an account have a negative opinion of the accounts and of those who visit them regularly.

“I didn’t mean to. I got a link from a friend but I didn’t really care and absolutely didn’t share anything. I was mad at my friend.” (Girl, age 15)

“It popped up in my feed. I’ve never given my consent to follow or to see photos or information from expose accounts.” (Boy, age 15)

“I didn’t realise what it was that I added back (on Snapchat). I checked through stories and found these, I blocked the accounts when I saw it. But it was not (!) an active visit.” (Boy, age 17)

“An expose account added me on Snapchat. I went into stories and whoever owned the account was asking me to send naked photos of people. They also posted naked photos. I was really upset and reported the account.” (Girl, age 17)

Those who are worried that they have been exposed or have had friends who were exposed also have a negative opinion of the accounts and report them regularly for breaking the platforms’ rules. Some children whose photos have been exposed ask a friend to check how bad it is rather than going into the account themselves.

“Because it popped up in my feed and I wanted to see if some disgusting person with the account had posted something of someone I knew so I could get it taken down.” (Girl, age 15)

“I didn’t know what it was, then when I realised, I blocked it. Another time was because one of my friends asked me to check if a photo of her had been posted, which it had so we reported it.”

(BOY, AGE 16)

“To see if anyone had shared photos of my friend. I did it to help her.” (Girl, age 15)

“Because it’s cool and there are photos of girls my age.”
(Boy, age 16)

While many of the children express ambivalence about or disapproval of expose accounts, there are others who don’t think it is at all problematic to visit or participate in activity on expose accounts. There are more boys than girls in the latter group, and they often justify the behaviour by saying the content is attractive.

“Wanted to see everything. It was quite nice because I got to see good-looking girls.” (Boy, age 17).

“I was turned on.” (Boy, age 13)

In the survey material there were also two individuals – a girl and a boy – who owned or had previously owned an expose account. These two children did not express any awareness that they had committed a crime and that, if they were old enough to be held criminally responsible, they could be indicted and liable for damages.

“I’ve owned one and I like to read about other people’s secrets :)”

(GIRL, AGE 16)

What do children think about why others visit expose accounts?

WHEN WE COMPARE the reason why children have visited expose accounts themselves and why they think that others have done so, two categories stand out. That the platforms recommend the accounts is not included in any of the responses to the question of why children think that others visit expose accounts. On the other hand, one in five children stated this as a reason for their own visits. We also identified a new category: children who visit the accounts out of spite and to harass someone or share photos, which no one stated as the reason for their own visit. Curiosity or that the person thinks it is fun are still the main reasons. More girls than boys state this as a reason for other children visiting the accounts, although the reverse was true for why they themselves visited them. One explanation for the difference is that far fewer girls think that others wanted to check if they themselves or their friends had been exposed. More children state that they believe others visit expose accounts because they find it sexually exciting than those who state that they themselves do it for that reason.



We asked the children why they believe other children visit expose accounts. The responses are divided into the following broad categories:

- They're mean**
The person was mean and wanted to make someone else feel bad. 
- Excitement/arousal**
The person did it to be sexually aroused.
- Worry**
The person did it because they were worried that they or a friend had been exposed.
- Curiosity**
The person was curious or thought it was fun.
- Peer pressure**
The person's friends visited the account or they gave into peer pressure. 
- Don't know**
The respondent didn't know (and had often wondered themselves).

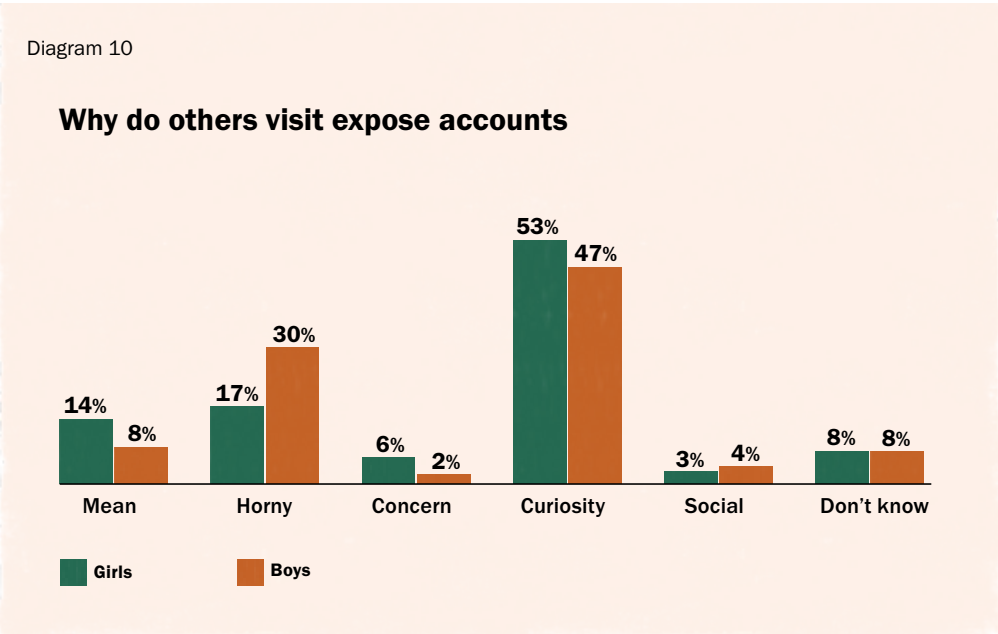
The diagram shows how the responses are divided between girls and boys. The fact that many children give reasons that are similar to their own when they interpret other's responses does not necessarily mean that they equate their own visits with those of others. Several tried to distance themselves from their own visits stating that it only happened a few times, was by accident or happened when they were younger. At the same time, we noticed that the tone towards others who have visited expose accounts is more judgemental. Condemning those who visit expose accounts occurs both among those who have visited accounts themselves and those who have not.

"A lot of kids do it just to follow a trend or because they're curious when a rumour spreads and they want to check if it's true. The expose accounts should be reported to the police for defamation and breaking the law about spreading images." (Boy, age 15)

"Excitement, curiosity and to feel better about yourself. Some people are perhaps so pathetically boring that it's the most exciting thing going on in their life."
(GIRL, 15)

"Because people are stupid and are trying to be relevant. Also maybe they don't know any better."
(OTHER GENDER IDENTITY, AGE 15)

"I think some kids think it's a bit cool or do it because they have nothing else to do. They think it's so easy to sit in front of a screen and judge the person without knowing their situation." (Non-binary, age 15)



SOME OF THE CHILDREN'S responses are followed by a comment discussing the problem of visiting an expose account. The children describe the feeling of being curious and at the same time knowing that what they're doing is wrong. But when asked about why others visit the accounts, the children's responses describe how they don't think other children are torn about it in the same way.

"Because people think it's exciting and fun to do something you actually know is wrong." (Other gender identity, age 15)

"Because it's fun and exciting. Kids don't focus on the moralistic perspective and probably don't feel that they're taking part in something bad just by checking it out." (Boy, age 16)

A recurring theme is peer pressure and that visiting expose accounts is a shared experience. The responses make it clear that expose accounts are something children talk about often with each other. Meanwhile the adult world is kept out of it – both by those who are exposed and those visiting the accounts – so adults know nothing about it.

"You visit expose account because it's hard not to. Everyone talks about it so you have to know about it yourself to be part of the conversation." (Girl, age 15)

"You check it out to see if you're on there yourself or if someone you know is there, and so as not to feel excluded by all the others who follow them."

(GIRL, AGE 16)

"You get fomo (fear of missing out) when others talk about someone who's been exposed, and then you want to see for yourself."

(GIRL, AGE 17)



"To see if the rumours are true but unfortunately also to hate on people they don't like and to get some sort of revenge on people they already didn't like. Obviously there are lots of people who hate on people they don't know, but mainly you know who the person is."

(GIRL, AGE 17)

Several of the responses reveal that children feel they are less likely to be exposed if they themselves actively participate in activity on the accounts. There are thus incentives to harass the children who have already been exposed and to make a clear distinction between those who get exposed and those who don't.

"Because it's exciting and you want to know more about everyone so you can keep up and know what everyone's talking about. Also if you comment and joke about those who've been exposed, there is less chance you'll be exposed yourself." (Girl, age 13)

"Peer pressure and wanting to belong, being one of those who hasn't been exposed rather than one who has." (Boy, age 17)

Part of the fear of being exposed has to do with awareness that it can lead to being harassed, bullied and degraded by the people around you. In the responses it became clear that this is a natural consequence of the fact that photos, and rumours, are on an expose account. Curiosity is linked to a power perspective where the person who has been exposed loses status and becomes an "approved" victim for further harassment. This harassment clearly takes place in both the physical and digital world, which means that the exposed person has no safe zone away from the bullying.

"You do it because it's a fun thing to do. Either people aren't aware that it's wrong and therefore only see the fun part of it, or they know that and actually like seeing people being degraded." (Girl, age 17)

"I think people visit expose accounts because they want to create drama and spread rumours/share nude pictures. For these people a shared nude picture could lead to them writing mean things to the person who the naked photo is supposed to be of." (Girl, age 17)

Similar to the fear of being exposed, some of the children describe how harassment creates a kind of protective barrier for those who do it. It is not just about reducing the risk of being exposed, but also diverting attention from their own visit to the account.

"I think that people visit expose accounts because they want to see nudes of people without asking for them, so they can make the person in the photos feel bad and perhaps even get angry so no one pays attention to the fact that the person has actually visited one." (Girl, age 14)

Some children describe how the violence that can arise after being exposed is gender-related and that girls are punished more harshly and for different reasons than boys.

"Because people want to find people to talk shit about and bully." Girl, age 15

"People mainly like degrading women, and the label 'slut' is usually given to women = sexism."

(GIRL, AGE 14)

SOME CHILDREN MENTION violence in the form of blackmailing the victim. One motive for blackmail could be money. Leaked naked photos are also used to force the victim to provide more or more revealing or pornographic content and in return the blackmailer won't share the original ones with e.g. the victim's parents.

The fear of being exposed on an expose account is clear in the girls' responses. Even if they say that they may have visited the accounts because they were curious, the girls also say they were worried that they or someone they know may have been exposed. In several of the responses, the girls express a clear opinion as to why boys visit the accounts.

"I think that others my age are just as 'curious' as me. If you see that there's an expose account, you also want to check that you're not on it. A lot of guys seem to think it's funny." (Girl, age 17)

"It could be to see if you're on there yourself, or to report it. Then there are unfortunately many who go in just to see nude pictures and perhaps share the photos themselves." (Girl, age 17)

"Immature, perhaps want money or like blackmailing people."

(GIRL, AGE 17)

The responses and the opinions on the boys' activities on the accounts reveal that girls think most of those visiting them are boys and men.

This may seem surprising because just as many girls as boys have visited an expose account. One explanation could be that, despite the fact that their own experiences say differently, the public debate focuses primarily on men and boys in discussions about sexual offences. Another explanation can

be that the perception is that girls and boys visit expose accounts for different reasons and that the boys are more active or have other reasons, which are judged more harshly.

"Love to destroy people's lives and often guys who can't behave."

(GIRL, AGE 15)

"I feel like it's more boys than girls who visit expose accounts. I think that's because guys don't want to watch porn and they don't have a girlfriend they can share photos with, and there are expose photos that fix all that for them." (Girl, age 15)

The children's responses show that many believe that boys visit the accounts for sexual stimulation and that the content is used for masturbation. It is much more common for children to state that as a reason for other people's visits than their own.

"For guys it's because they're turned on." (Girl, age 17)

"Some of them want to masturbate but that means they're going to the accounts on purpose. But I didn't do it on purpose, I just wanted to check it out." (Boy, age 14)

"Even if it's awful, curiosity can still take over. You want to see if someone you know has had their photos shared. For some it may be about wanting content to masturbate to." (Girl, age 16)

In several of the responses the enticement is that someone they know or are of the same age has been exposed. Across all responses there is a lack of awareness that it may be a crime.

"Maybe people want to find someone they know, perhaps they want to find kids." (Boy, age 14)

"Because it feels exciting and people are curious about what kids that are younger than 18 look like." (Boy, age 17)

"Adrenalin gets people to feel more real when they're in the same country and of the same age as themselves or, in some cases, the age you were a few years ago." (Girl, age 15)

Some children believe that those who visit an expose account are looking for naked photos of people they're interested in but perhaps are afraid to ask for them directly.

"Perhaps there's someone you're interested in and you hear they are on the account and you want to see it." (Girl, age 15)

"Honestly, people are probably crazy or something. They want to see their crush naked or something like that."

(BOY, AGE 17)

There are also responses that indicate they hold the person who originally sent the photo responsible. In these instances the girls whose photos are posted are either described as unintelligent or seeking attention. One response said that they are being rightly punished for trusting the wrong person.

"Either because they want to be seen and choose to do it themselves or post on one of those accounts just because they got hold of someone's nudes in some way or because they want to see the people on the account." (Girl, age 16)

"Because there are a lot of nice guys that girls dump and go with fuckboys instead." (Boy, age 17)

"Because they want to know who's stupid enough to send photos to places where you know they can take a screenshot without seeing it."

(GIRL, AT 14)

The threat of exposure

One consequence of expose accounts is that many children feel an impending fear of being exposed. A partner, classmate or an unknown person could threaten to expose them on an expose account to get them to produce and send (more) exploitative content. Several children talked about how that could happen.

"My boyfriend threatened to share photos of me that he'd found from another girl, and said that he would share them if I didn't send actual photos of me and that if I didn't do it he was going to share someone else's photos with my name instead." (Girl, age 17)

"I happened to send a photo where people could see a bit of my boob, above, not the nipple. Then he wanted me to send more but I had clothes on. Then in the end he wanted me to send a video of me licking my boobs. I never wanted to but you're tricked by your own trauma. I blocked him because he started sending dick pics and then his friend who had the same name adds me, which made me suspicious. He said he had the photos and I asked which photos. Then he said I should add him (the guy) again because he wanted to talk to me privately. When I'd added him he sends a screenshot where he had saved the photo without letting me know about it and then he threatened to share it on all the expose accounts with all the info about me that I hadn't even given him, address, school, full name and stuff. He was also going to do that if I blocked him again. I never sent it to him and said that my phone was dead and needed to be fixed and that my mum had taken my phone, just a bunch of lies. The next day or two days after (can't really remember) I told my mum because I couldn't take it anymore and we went to the police. Then a few months later I couldn't find him in my Snap so he'd probably blocked me." (Girl, age 14)

There are situations where photos of someone who is not the child in question are shared and tagged with the child's name. Children find it hard to defend themselves against this.

"When I was 11 I was in a phase where I didn't feel good and couldn't say no. I was used by boys who got me to send butt pics and they're still being shared around. There is a video of when a girl fingers herself and pisses in bed. I was bullied because when me and my ex ended it he accused me of making that video. And I didn't want to put the blame on some other girl. But I didn't want to take the blame either because I know it isn't me. There's proof of that too. This is really hard for me." (Girl, age 15)

"I myself am a girl who's been exposed multiple times and 8/10 times it wasn't even me in the photos, but people simply want to destroy everyone's reputation."

(GIRL, AGE 16)

Local expose accounts

The survey reveals two important drivers that explain the popularity of local expose accounts. One of these drivers is gossip and the other is bullying in the form of systematic discrimination and harassment of an individual.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL EXPOSE accounts as a place for gossip is clear in many of the responses in which the children highlight their curiosity about what is happening and that they want to know other people's secrets.¹⁷ At first glance, this curiosity may not seem particularly serious because it is a common human phenomenon. Gossip isn't necessarily malicious in nature and many children have no desire to harm or harass anyone. The purpose is rather to build community and belong to a group that knows what is going on at school. Many people visit the expose accounts out of curiosity. They don't consider it harmful because they're only looking and not harassing people who have been exposed.

It could be argued that the nature of the photos is less significant because the visit has no obvious sexual intention. It is, however, clear that sharing visual content showing nakedness or a sexual context is a far more serious violation of privacy than many other types of rumours or gossip. Also, the children who visit expose accounts are participating in the illegal sharing of intimate content.

In addition to the fact that the sharing of this type of content contributes to it becoming normalised, it also functions as a way of disciplining children. This applies mainly to girls who are thought to be

breaking with the norm by demonstrating their sexuality too explicitly.¹⁸ For the child victim, it is also painful to know that others are looking at them and that the local expose accounts are spreading gossip about the photo or videos that were either sent in the belief that they would remain private or because they were pressured into it. Regardless of whether the gossip is intentionally insulting or not, looking and gossiping are in many cases considered to be a serious breach of privacy. Feeling that "everyone has seen" the content and is talking behind one's back is often mentioned as being particularly painful for the victim.¹⁹

The expose accounts' role in systematic harassment is not even innocent on the surface because it involves violating and subjecting innocent children to criminal acts. Often the photos or videos that are used for this purpose are not of the identified child. Here the act of tagging or identifying the child plays a role in the systematic harassment because the child often finds it impossible to defend themselves against the accusation. The open-ended responses show us that children also discover content that was created without their knowledge, such as naked photos taken of the child during intercourse or when they were in the shower. There are also cases where children are tricked into sending content under false pretences. It isn't necessarily worse to be degraded in this way than if someone the child knows betrays a confidence, but the manner in which it is done demonstrates the particular vulnerability of these children and the collective will to degrade them.

¹⁷ Bindsbøl Holm Johansen, Katrine, Bodil Maria Pedersen, and Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen. "Visual gossiping: Non-consensual 'nude' sharing among young people in Denmark." *Culture, health & sexuality* 21.9 (2019): 1029-1044.

¹⁸ Hunehall Berndtsson, Kristina, and Ylva Odenbring. "They don't even think about

what the girl might think about it': Students' views on sexting, gender inequalities and power relations in school." *Journal of Gender Studies* 30.1 (2021): 91-101.

¹⁹ Mortensen, Signe Uldbjerg. "Defying shame: shame-relations in digital sexual assault." *Mediekultur: Journal of media and communication research* 36.67 (2020): 100-120

"I think what she did was wrong and that she should feel bad about it and that everyone is laughing at her. In the end it will blow over but everything is her fault so there you go!"

(BOY, AGE 17)

IN THE QUANTITATIVE material about children who have been exposed through the use of photos of others, it is clear that these children often belong to groups with an elevated risk of being bullied in other ways, such as children with a neuro-psychological diagnosis or boys who identify as LGBTQIA+. Research shows a correlation between various forms of cyberbullying and other types of bullying, such as relational bullying (exclusion), psychological bullying and physical bullying. Based on the children's responses, it is clear that they often experience all three types and that the violence they are subjected to after being exposed is often serious and sexual in nature. Sharing images online means that the violence is ever-present and people who don't know the child can also leave comments or contact them.

The line between gossip and bullying is not always clear because being exposed often leads to the victim losing social status. Nor is there a clear point at which gossip turns into bullying. In some open-ended responses children say that they think sending nude pictures is objectionable and that social punishment is justified.

In an environment where nakedness and sex – at least in documented content – is considered morally objectionable, the threshold for gossip turning into more systematic harassment is lowered. It also creates a feeling of moral superiority in those who look at or share the content as their own transgression is minimalised because they feel their actions are



justified. Uncertainty about how being exposed will impact the individual creates a type of social control that impacts everyone.

"It's her fault for sending photos of her private parts. I think so, or it's not just what I think, it's the truth and I'm right even if you say I'm wrong. I think what she did was wrong and that she should feel bad about it and that everyone is laughing at her. In the end it will blow over but everything is her fault so there you go!"
(Boy, age 17)

Social mechanisms in global expose accounts

The purpose of the global expose accounts is different to some extent to the purpose of local ones because it is rare for the visitor and the exposed person to know each other.

INSTEAD THE MAIN purpose seems to be a homo-social environment where boys and young men use girls' naked photos to create a community with each other.

This community is based on opinions and behaviours that are condemned by society but are encouraged in closed internet environments. By encouraging each other to share content, to comment and to deride the girls in the photos using grossly sexist and racist language, a digital parallel community is created within these groups where misogyny is the norm. The participants

encourage each other to obtain their own exploitative content, to share it and to cause the victim as much harm as possible through continued sharing, insults and threats. This behaviour gives a person status in the group. In this environment, the pressure on the individual to obtain new and unique material increases. As misogyny has been normalised in the group, the threshold for using threats and blackmail, even against very young people, is lowered in order to obtain exploitative content. The victims are girls who are on social media and those who have a relationship with these boys and men.

Children who victimise children

There is a lack of knowledge among adults about the existence of expose accounts. The adult world finds it hard to take action against expose accounts because the accounts are in digital environments where adults are not invited in and where children can be both victims and perpetrators.

IT CAN BE HARD for parents to accept that their child could be a person who victimises other children. When we posed questions to parents in a 2021 survey about children's presence and naked photos online and the risks posed by the internet, it was clear from their responses that adults are primarily concerned about their child being victims of sexual offences committed by adults, not by other children.²⁰

We know that adults, often without realising it, create an environment of guilt and shame around sex on the internet by conveying a negative image of anyone who has shared naked content. This often makes children who are victims of a crime reluctant to seek support. When the perpetrators know this, it is easier for them to share the content. Children are left alone online, in their sexual exploration and with the guilt that comes from being exposed.

²⁰ ECPAT Sverige, "Vad föräldrar inte vet. Men behöver veta om barns tillvaro och risker på nätet", ECPAT (2021)

Exposing and other criminal activity

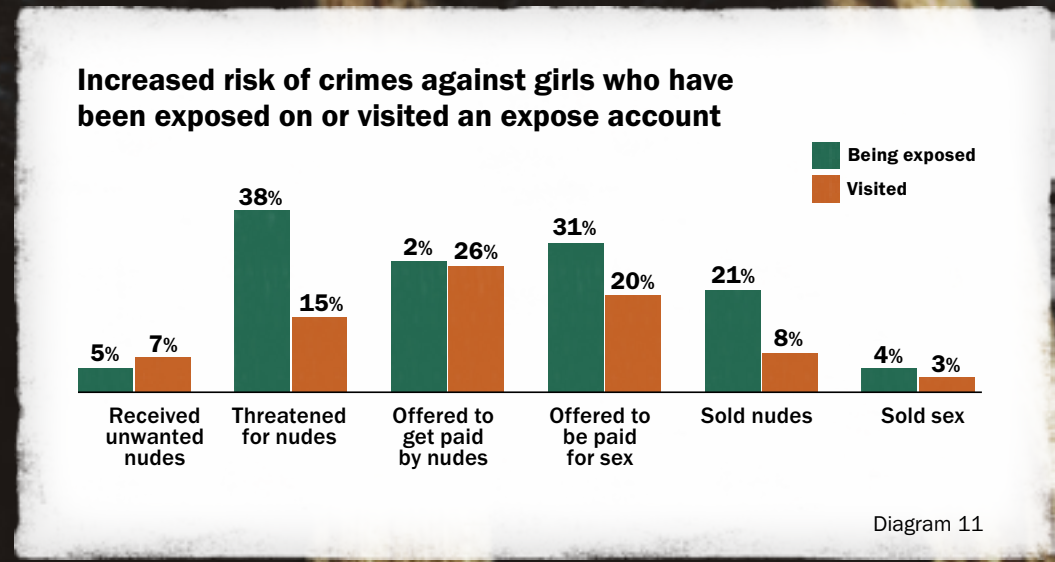
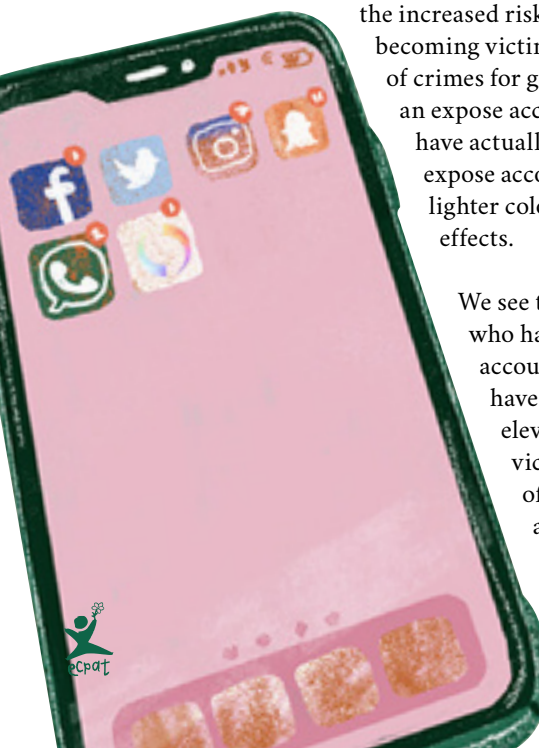
A relatively large number of girls (546) responded to questions about expose accounts and being victims of a crime. This enabled us to look at whether the children who are exposed also run an increased risk of becoming victims of other sexual offences on the internet.

WE DID THIS BY CHECKING a number of variables – age, LGBTQIA+ identification and if the person has a neuropsychological diagnosis. We used the same model for girls who have visited expose accounts and who have not been exposed. The reason for dividing them up is that girls who have been exposed and visit an account may have other reasons for doing so than girls who visit them without having been exposed. The boys who responded to both questions and who have been exposed are too few in number to make a comparison. Diagram 11 shows the increased risk, as a percentile, of becoming victims of various types of crimes for girls who have visited an expose account, and those who have actually been exposed on an expose account. The columns in a lighter colour show insignificant effects.

We see that both children who have visited an expose account and those who have been exposed have an elevated risk of becoming victims of all the types of crimes that we asked about in this year's

From the previous year's survey, from our helpline and from interviews with children, it is clear that children whose photos are shared through expose accounts are often threatened and offered money for sex or naked photos.

survey, except for selling sex or – in the case of the exposed girls – receiving undesired naked photos compared with other children. The main difference between the groups is in the percentage of children whose naked photos someone threatened to share, but the differences between those who were offered money for sex and those who sold naked photos is also notably large. It is, however, important to be clear about the fact that it is hard to draw conclusions on the direction of causality and whether the girls who had been exposed were more vulnerable before the photos were shared, or if they were victimised as a consequence of the photos of them being shared. From the previous year's survey, from our helpline and from interviews with children, it is clear that children whose photos are shared through expose accounts are often threatened and offered money for sex or naked photos.



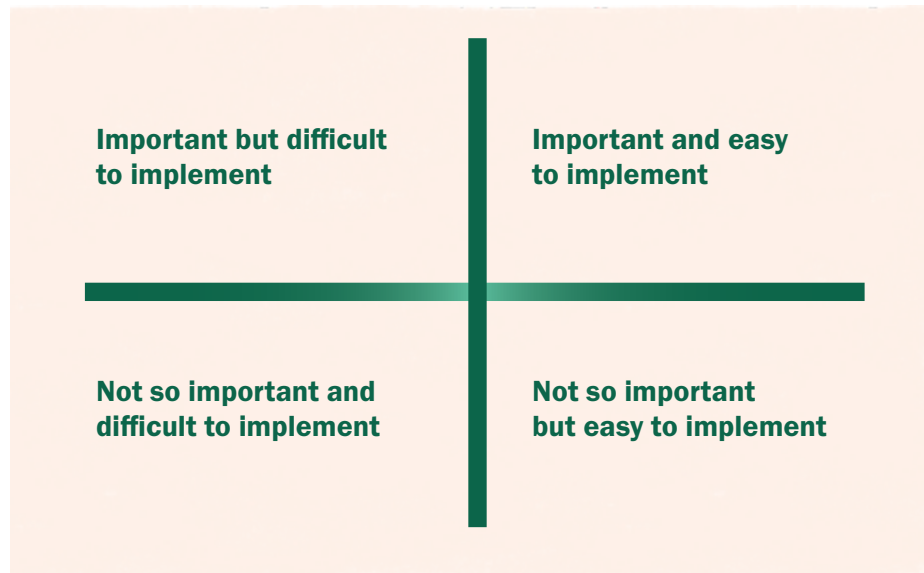
Which solutions do children suggest?

ECPAT's method includes letting children participate in analysing the responses to the survey and allowing them to suggest solutions.

WHEN WORKING on this report we were especially curious about what children saw as solutions to the problem of local expose accounts being created and spread among children. The children were initially divided into small groups where each group was asked to provide three solutions for what four different actors could do. The actors were the children themselves, the platforms where the content exists, the judicial system with the police and courts, and schools. Once the children had written down their suggestions, each group was asked to rank them in order of which they thought were the best ways to prevent the spread of expose accounts, to help the victims, and how easy they thought the suggestions would be to implement. This was done through a prioritisation exercise, where the children placed the suggestions based on how important and also how implementable they were. The more important the suggestion

was, the higher it was placed. The easier it was to implement, the further to the right it was placed. This was visualised with the help of a 2x2 matrix.

Suggestions placed in the upper half are those that are considered important and the higher up they are, the more important they are considered to be. The further to the right a suggestion is placed, the easier it is to implement. The ideal suggestion is thus placed in the upper right quadrant, and the closer to the upper right corner, the better it is. Once we had compiled all of the material we let a mixed group of slightly older children discuss the workshop results. This took place in a group interview with four children. In addition to referring to the results, they also discussed the expose accounts as well as the responsibility of politicians and parents. Some of this information is included earlier in this report.



Children's responsibility

It became clear that the children in the analysis groups saw children taking action themselves as central to solving the problem. There was a difference between the genders in terms of to whom the children chose to assign responsibility.

THE PARTICIPANTS in the boys' groups to a greater extent emphasised being responsible for one's own behaviour and expressed that the best way to stop expose accounts was to not use the platform, to not visit or like the accounts and to not participate in gossip about the victim at school. Two out of three of the boys' suggestions for what children can do referred to this type of individual behaviour, while this was only expressed in one out of three suggestions from the girls' groups. The girls instead gave greater weight to reporting the accounts that share illegal content to the platforms and to the police, or seeking help in the adult world. Only one suggestion from the boys' groups suggested reporting the accounts to the police, and nothing was said about seeking help in the adult world. One suggestion from each gender was about children being able to take direct action against those sharing materials and getting them to stop. Another suggestion in one of the boys' groups mentioned supporting those who had been exposed. These suggestions also emphasised individual responsibility, although in this case it was aimed at a person who was affected by an expose account.

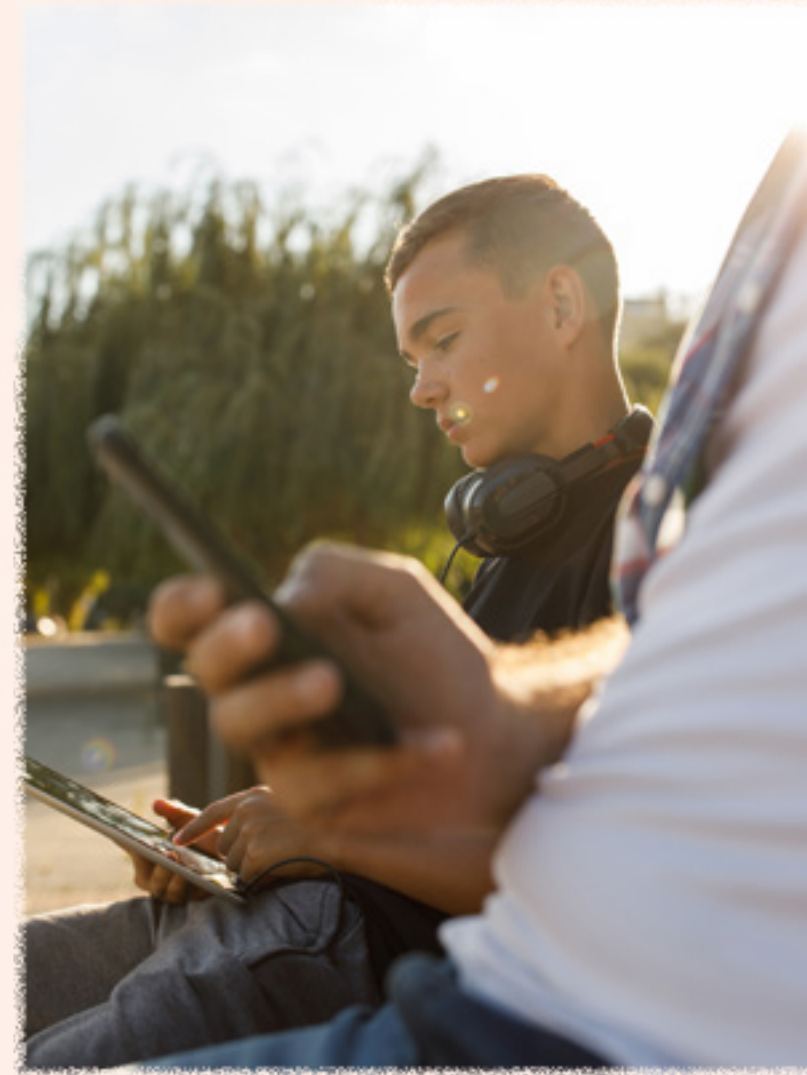


Table 1

	Avoid the accounts and the gossip	Report or notify	Find support in the adult world	Act against individuals	Support victims
Girls	3	3	2	1	0
Boys	6	1	0	1	1
Total	9	4	2	2	1



"I don't think adults and schools can do much. It's up the kids themselves."

(GIRL, ANALYSIS GROUP)

DIAGRAM 12 SHOWS where the children placed the various proposals based on what they thought of them. The girls' responses are symbolised by circles and the boys' by diamonds. Diagram 12 shows that the children believe there are things they themselves can do that are both important and implementable when it comes to preventing expose accounts and supporting the victims. There are, however, important differences between the genders here. The suggestion that is ranked the most important by boys – supporting the victim – is not mentioned in the girls' groups and the suggestion that girls consider the most important – finding support in the adult world – is not mentioned in the boys' groups. We also see that the individual behaviour – not visiting the accounts, not participating in gossip, telling those who share content not to do it and supporting the victims – is, across the board, considered more important by the boys and more implementable by the girls. On the other hand, girls think that it is both more important and easier to report to the platforms or to the police than boys do. Boys consider this as the least important of the actions that children can take.

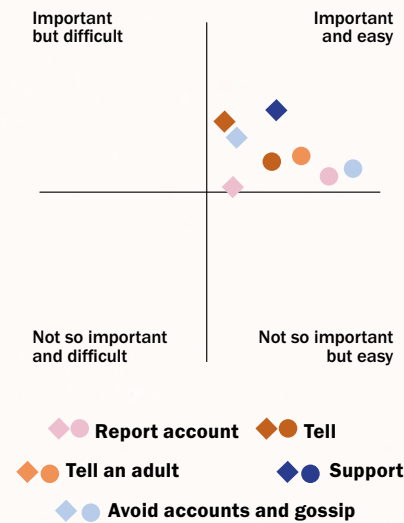
Given the survey responses, the children in the analysis groups seem to underestimate the attraction that these accounts have and that many children visit them even if they feel ambiguous about it or have a negative opinion of them. Two of the boys' groups point to gossip as an important reason why photos are shared. Surprisingly, this aspect is entirely absent in the girls' responses – despite the fact that more girls highlighted this in the survey. Finally, we see that the boys in the analysis groups, just as the boys in our past surveys, are less likely to regard going to the adult world for support as a workable strategy. This also seems to apply to going to the digital platforms and the police.

When discussing the results, the children were split on what children themselves can do to stop expose accounts and to support the victims. They recognise the notion of individual responsibility – not least in how people approach expose accounts and among those who share naked photos – at the same time as they believe it is difficult for the adult world to do anything about the situation.

"You have to remember that it's a world where if we give it power, we will be controlled by it." (Girl, analysis group)

Diagram 12

What can the children do?



"If someone says they have photos and they're going to share them, you shouldn't encourage them. After all, it's just like air – it has to go in here and out there – and it's nothing you should react to yourself." (Girl, analysis group)

Children are clear about the fact that they should do something if content showing someone they know is shared.

"If someone shared photos of my friend I wouldn't ask why they did it. I would do everything I could for my friend. I can't be nice to someone who has degraded my friend. It's not enough to just say something." (Boy, analysis group)

At the same time, they are ambivalent about how the problem should be solved, and they think that adults need to act to prevent it from escalating.

"It wouldn't help to confront the person sharing photos; that's the responsibility of the adults. It would just lead to more arguing because young people have a different mentality than adults have."

"They feel more like they need to fight with each other, while adults do it for another reason." (Girl, analysis group)

"You feel like an adult and think you have to solve your own problems. Unfortunately a lot of kids solve it with violence." (Boy, analysis group)

The children also point out that power hierarchies may play a role in what children choose to do and, in some cases, this sometimes involves taking risks.

"I think it's become normal to share photos so people don't care anymore. I also think it depends a lot on who shares them. If you've got a lot of friends, people think you're cool then they also think it's cool for you to have photos and share them." (Girl, analysis group)

Adults' responsibility, argues one girl, is about changing norms among children by starting early on when they're young.

"They think there's nothing wrong with sending photos, maybe someone forces you or you want a guy to like you. I think adults should teach children from a young age why it's wrong to share photos and about the consequences of doing it." (Girl, analysis group)

Children also think that they should take responsibility for letting the adult world know what is happening if someone has been victimised.

"Kids also have a responsibility to talk to teachers or report it to the police." (Boy, analysis group)

Finally, they have some advice for adults; advice that is similar to all the advice we receive from children regarding how adults – especially parents – should behave if a child confides in them.

"Put yourself in the kid's situation. Adults can be quick to judge and tell kids off. Think before you speak and try to see it from the kid's perspective."

(BOY, ANALYSIS GROUP)



	Harder moderation	Remove accounts	Cooperate with police	Verify age	Limit pictures
Girls	4	2	1	2	1
Boys	3	3	2	1	1
Total	7	5	3	2	1

Table 2

GIVEN THAT THE PLATFORMS have functions that encourage children to visit accounts with illegal content – which also helps the accounts get more followers – the question of responsibility is even more important. Looking at the children’s responses, we can categorise them as follows: stricter monitoring (including one girls’ group that suggested that the platforms pre-screen everything that is posted) and taking down the accounts and photos quickly, working with the police and limiting people’s ability to share photos with young users.

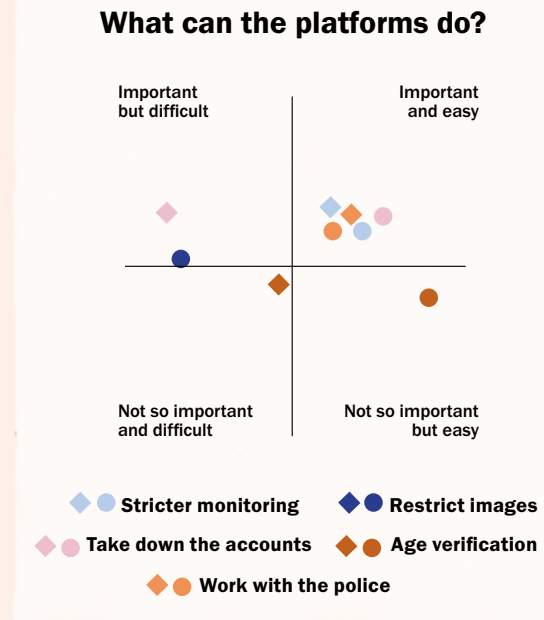
In diagram 13 we see where the children have placed the suggestions about the platforms’ responsibility. Several of the suggestions are placed in the upper right quadrant. Both girls and boys think that taking down the accounts and cooperation between the platforms and the police would be important steps in reducing the number of expose accounts and supporting the victims. They also think it would be relatively easy for the platforms to implement this. Girls also think that

stricter content monitoring is both important and would be relatively easy to do, while boys are more doubtful about this. Neither boys nor girls think that stricter age verification would be effective to stop expose accounts and the boys also think that this would be difficult to implement. The girls think that it is relatively important to make it more difficult for children to share photos, but also think that it would be difficult to implement.

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Diagram 13



Several of the children shared that, in their experience, problematic and illegal content is often left on the accounts too long without any steps being taken, even after it has been reported.

problematic and illegal content is often left on the accounts too long without any steps being taken, even after it has been reported. There is also a sense that accounts and people are rarely blocked, even when they’re participating in harassment and unlawful activity. What children do not mention, but which is clear from the survey, is that it is not merely a matter of the platforms monitoring activity and shutting down inappropriate accounts. The platforms have also created functionality that recommends expose accounts to children, which leads to widespread sharing



in the children’s environment. In certain instances we have seen social media platforms taking swift and effective action to reduce the sharing of other types of problematic material. A couple of examples are materials that are linked to terrorism and disinformation during the pandemic. The question is why they can’t implement similar measures to protect children and prevent them from becoming victims of serious sexual offences. The children want the platforms to be proactive and work with the authorities by reporting illegal content and helping the police to do their job, and that is an important step they can take to help child victims of online offences. In Nude Online 2021 we asked children what type of support they wanted from the police and it became clear to us that children want the police to be present on the platforms that children use. Children want to be able to communicate directly with the police so they can ask questions and file a report if something happens.



"Everything happens online. It's not as if people go around showing people photos; everything happens on these platforms and if there were no accounts, no photos would be shared."

(GIRL, ANALYSIS GROUP)

BEING EXPOSED on an expose account can lead to a deep sense of shame and guilt, resulting in children being afraid to report the issue for fear of how their parents or guardian may react.

"The police could be there on most of the platforms that kids are often on, such as Snapchat or Instagram, so you can report it to them right there instead of going to their website!"
(Girl, age 15, Nude Online 2021)

"Having a quick button or if they asked questions from time to time about whether anything has happened, and a button that goes directly to the police."
(Boy, age 17, Nude Online 2021)

"Having a special page for that, where you can report things and also get support and find out if it's really a crime." (Girl, age 14, Nude Online 2021)

Where children say that they have been recommended an account by a platform or another child, or that an account has added a whole school, the main platforms mentioned are Snapchat and Instagram. These are two of the three largest platforms for children and they therefore have a special responsibility to protect their users from abuse.

In discussions about the results, children in the analysis groups say that the social media

platforms create the conditions for the expose accounts' existence, and that stricter monitoring and taking down accounts is what they would like to see in an ideal world.

They see several problems currently. One boy said that it can feel pointless to report an account.

"There have to be a lot of reports in order for it to be taken down. If you report it and you're the only one, it won't make any difference."

(BOY, ANALYSIS GROUP)

They say that the photos remain online even if the accounts are taken down and that the platforms have no way of verifying users.

"Maybe it doesn't help to take down the accounts. They still have the photos, they can create new accounts and they can still share them." (Girl, analysis group)

"Stricter rules would spoil things for them. It wouldn't be worth it for them because they [expose accounts] bring them more shares, more likes and maybe also more users." (Girl, analysis group)

The judicial system's responsibilities

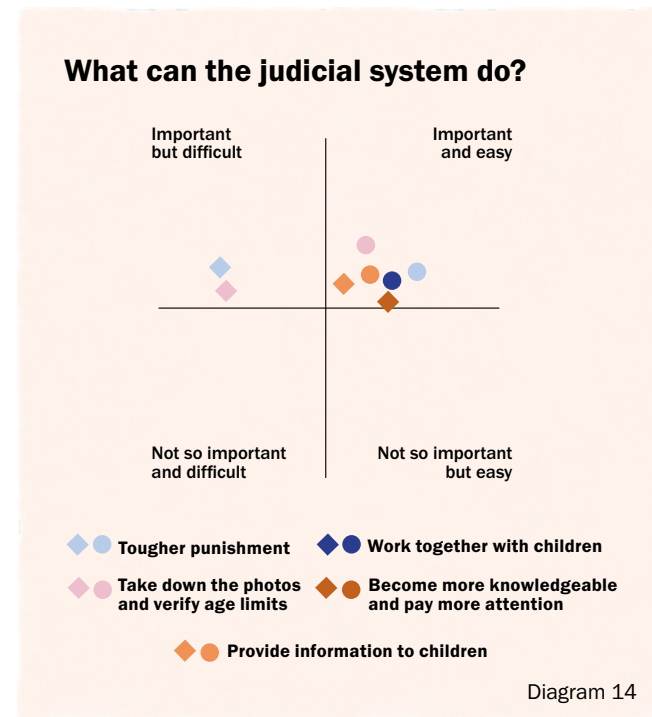
Two of the girls' groups were asked to come up with (a total of) three suggestions for how schools and the judicial system should act. We divided the children's suggestions into the following categories:

- Tougher punishment for the owners of the platforms or for those who share photos.
- Measures such as the police taking down photos or verifying age limits on the platforms.
- The police learning more about and paying more attention to what is happening online.
- The police providing information about which activity constitutes a crime.
- The police and children working together around expose accounts.

The responses correspond well with children's responses in the 2021 survey.

Table 3 shows what children think about the suggestions regarding the responsibilities of the judicial system.

Most of the suggestions were ranked as less important and more difficult to implement than most of the children's responses about the responsibility of the children and the platforms. In general, the girls consider actions by the judicial system as both



more important and easier to implement than the boys do. They think that two of the suggestions – tougher punishment or the police taking down photos and verifying age limits – would be difficult to put into practice.

Table 3

	Harder penalty	Download photos and check age limit	More knowledge and attention	Inform children	Collaborate with children
Girls	2	2	0	1	1
Boys	3	1	4	1	0
Total	5	3	4	2	1

THE CHILDREN HAVE LESS confidence in the ability of the judicial system to reduce the number of expose accounts than in changing the behaviour of the platforms or of children.

Furthermore, boys consider several of the suggestions to be relatively difficult to implement. There is some frustration expressed about the police, who they perceive as ill-informed and inactive when it comes to combatting internet-related sexual offences.

At the same time the children's responses and reasoning show that they themselves lack important information on which online activity is illegal and what the police can do. This lack of knowledge among children is a serious matter because it results in the erosion of their confidence in the ability of the judicial system.

It is clear that children experience the judicial system's role as having low priority. The conversation goes back to the need for the police to take these crimes seriously. They also discuss the responsibility of politicians in relation to the judicial system, and that they could change the way they look at the vulnerability of children and young people.

"I'm sure they think it's a small thing that's been blown up into a huge thing. They feel that they are so high up that they don't pay attention to these small problems – that they think are small."
 (GIRL, ANALYSIS GROUP)

"I believe that politicians should pay attention to this because I don't think they think about it – that kids are being exposed online. They should start thinking more about this and then they can come up with ideas." (Boy, analysis group)

"Create a special police task force to focus on online harassment, where it's taken more seriously and people have time to work on it. I think that if they know there's an account, it would be quite easy for them to find out who is behind it."
 (BOY, ANALYSIS GROUP)

One piece of concrete advice from the children to the politicians is to allocate more resources to address online harassment.

At the same time the children believe that law enforcement agencies need to change their attitude.

"It seems to me they don't spend time investigating social media, but they spend time on other things instead. I haven't heard of anyone being sued for it. I think that if someone degrades another person, people should know about it, but I don't think the police and schools spend time on this." (Boy, analysis group)

One girl feels that it's partly to do with the age of the children who are exposed on the accounts.

"It would be considered more serious if it was full of photos of younger kids, it would be linked to other things." (Girl, analysis group)

Another girl thinks it's about who is behind the photos.

"It's hard to punish people under the age of 15 and it's often kids under 15 who are sharing these photos. It's hard to see how the law will be able to stop it. You can't put a 13 year old in prison and that makes it harder." (Girl, analysis group)

"Take these crimes, these types of sexual offences among kids, seriously." Girl, analysis group

The schools' responsibility

The girls have slightly fewer suggestions than the boys on what schools could do to prevent expose accounts. The suggestions about the schools' responsibility have been divided into the following categories:

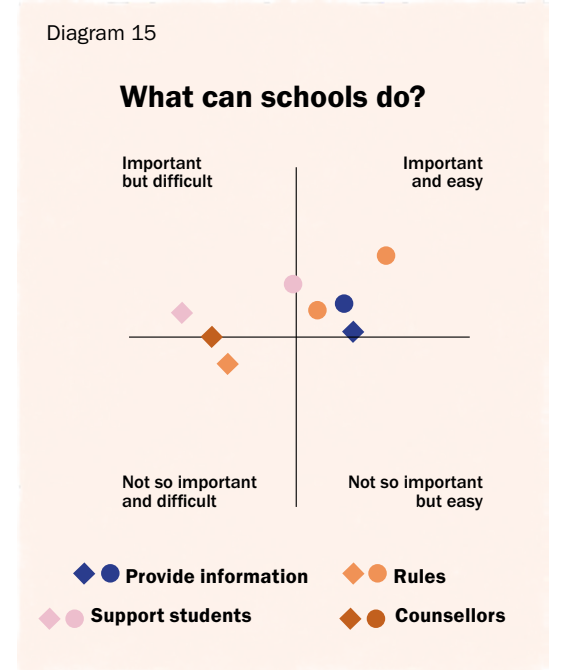
- Provide more information.
- Produce common rules.
- Support students who have been exposed.
- Increase accessibility to and reduce the stigma around seeing a school counsellor.

The suggestion for more information – from teachers or external actors – includes that it should be provided on a regular basis and in ongoing conversations (rather than on a single occasion). The suggestion for common rules relates to issues such as not using mobile phones during school hours and how students should treat other, both during and after school. The suggestion to support students includes having conversations, the school being better at seeing the signs when someone has been victimised and taking the initiative to reach out. Regarding the suggestion to make it easier to meet a counsellor, the girls thought that all students should be offered a regular appointment. They see the fact that all the other students can see when someone goes to a counsellor as an obstacle to seeking help. The boys' suggestion was instead that counsellors should be more available and offer drop-ins for when something happens.

In diagram 16 we see how children have ranked the suggestions of what schools can do. In the same way as with the judicial system, we see a big difference between boys and girls. In general, girls rank more highly than boys the ability of schools to take important steps to stop expose accounts. In all suggestions, apart from those about providing information to children, the boys think it would be significantly harder for schools to implement the suggestions than the girls do. It is clear that the children – and above all the boys – have little confidence in the ability of schools to do anything meaningful to prevent expose accounts. One thing that came out in the girls' suggestions is that they wish schools could do something to support students, and that this is partly about student healthcare and school counsellors. Although the girls consider counsellors to be important, they describe how embarrassing it is to see a counsellor when others become aware of it; that seeing a counsellor can lead to questions and harassment, and they wish that asking for help would be less stigmatised.

	Information	Common rules	Support students	Easier to meet a counsellor
Girls	4	2	1	2
Boys	3	3	2	1
Total	7	5	3	2

Table 4



The children's relative lack of confidence in schools as proactive actors to reduce the number of expose accounts is troubling. It is clear that much of the violence that happens after someone has been exposed happens at school and that the typical perpetrator is a classmate. Schools, supported by other actors, should play a key role in efforts to stop expose accounts, but for this to happen, children need to trust schools. Children at the schools where we conducted workshops knew about digital violence and the teachers we talked to realised it was an important issue for the school to address. Despite this, we found that the boys' confidence in the school's ability to act to stop expose accounts was relatively low.

Among children who commented on the results, their expectations of schools were higher than of other actors. However, they think that schools are currently not paying enough attention to the problem.

“I think schools should deal with this because the police aren't doing much. I think the first priority of schools should be to handle what happens among the kids.”

(GIRL, ANALYSIS GROUP)

“Many associate school with what happens during the school day, but there is so much more that happens outside that they could help with too – both with school work and mental health, so I actually think they should take a greater responsibility for this.” (Girl, analysis group)

“I understand what they mean by schools not being able to help, but it feels like schools aren't trying either, that they haven't committed 100 percent to it. But schools can do more than they think.” Boy, analysis group

CHILDREN HAVE IDEAS on what schools could do.

"They could start with individual conversations so that kids don't feel ashamed, group discussions with the whole class, perhaps have a psychologist who kids can go and talk to, and then if they notice something is happening, that photos of someone have been shared, they should contact the police, talk to the child about how they feel and find out who shared them." (Girl, analysis group)

"It would be good to have someone talk about it at least once a year; they could invite a speaker to talk about consequences and problems. Then perhaps kids would think twice before shaming someone." (Girl, analysis group)

"A speaker, someone who is knowledgeable, perhaps a counsellor, a psychologist or school nurse would work. Someone who is aware about kids' health." (Boy, analysis group)

"Individual conversations with those who've been victimised and kids who have victimised others, talk to parents, hold meetings.... anything to show that this behaviour is not OK." (Boy, analysis group)

The children emphasise how extremely important it is for schools to act, because sharing naked photos on expose accounts leads to serious consequences for the victims.

"Schools must help. Many kids have taken their own lives over things like this. Sharing photos, being degraded, it's like someone spitting in your face." (Boy, analysis group)

At the same time, children currently find it hard to accept the help that their school offers, especially through counsellors. Many children feel that it's problematic to see a counsellor when they've become a victim of a crime.

"Kids feel ashamed to go and talk to a counsellor, because if someone says the word counsellor it's associated with social services, problems at home and problems with themselves." (Girl, analysis group)

"Counsellors don't only get social services involved but also parents as well. I think children who have gone through something like this just want to talk, not to worry about their parents or other adults finding out." (Girl, analysis group)

The children see the school counsellors' and school nurses' duty to report crimes as an obstacle in solving the problem within the current structures. They would also like school counsellors to be able to wait before reporting an incident and instead listen to how the child would like to proceed. The children keep returning to how extremely important it is to be able to trust school staff.

"Be careful, especially when dealing with children, and talk to them before making a decision." (Girl, analysis group)

"They have to prove that they [school staff] can be trusted, that kids can go to them if something happens and they're suffering."

(BOY, ANALYSIS GROUP)



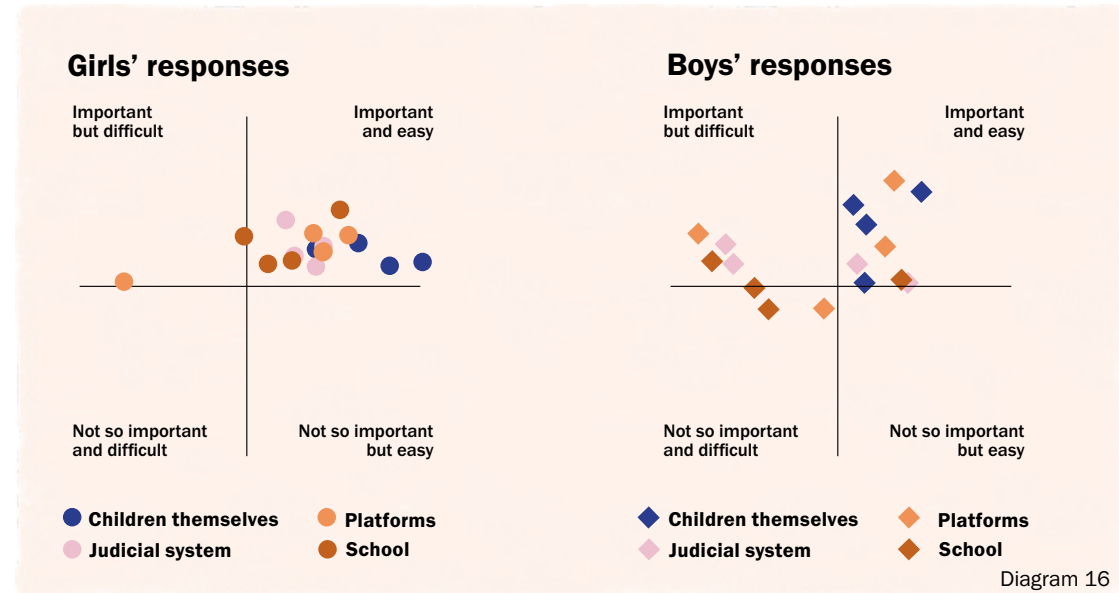
Discussion of children's analysis

When we look at each diagram individually, the differences between boys and girls do not appear to be significant. The children's suggestions are similar – sometimes identical – regardless of gender.

THEY RANK THE SUGGESTIONS in a similar way, although with certain differences in how important or implementable they are. If we compile the girls' and the boys' responses respectively in separate diagrams, the differences become clear, as shown below.

We see that the girls rank the most suggestions as important and implementable and it is hard to distinguish between actors as more or less important, or the suggestions as more or less difficult to implement. When we look at the boys' rankings we see that two suggestions – the children themselves and the platforms – are ranked significantly higher. Suggestions regarding schools have a lower

ranking – both in terms of how important and how implementable they are considered to be. The judicial system is ranked slightly higher than schools, but significantly lower than suggestions about the children themselves or the platforms. They rank the suggestions in a similar way, although with certain differences in how important or implementable they are. If we compile the girls' and the boys' responses respectively in separate diagrams, the differences become clear, as shown below. The judicial system is also ranked lower among the boys than among the girls. Overall we could say that the girls and boys have two different strategies to prevent expose accounts and support the victims.



THE GIRLS SEEM TO REGARD expose accounts as a problem that needs to be solved at the societal level and that the children themselves, the companies behind the platforms, the judicial system and schools can all help with the solution. The boys focus more on the children's own ability to solve the problem and the way in which companies manage the platforms where expose accounts appear. Schools and the judicial system have a lesser role to play as problem-solvers. This is not to say that the boys are taking the problem less seriously. On the contrary, in some cases, such as support for victims and acting responsibly by not participating in gossip about expose accounts, the boys show greater insight into the mechanisms behind the expose accounts than the girls do. The boys stress that children have a responsibility to act in a moral way and to support the victims. The girls think more about building structures around the children so they can get support and help from the adult world and other actors. They think that their own actions are important, but not as important as the boys think they are.

The boys' focus on individual responsibility can to some extent be explained by gender norms. We see in the survey that boys are less likely than girls to seek help if they've been a victim of a cybercrime. They also tend to place more blame on the victim.

Their open-ended responses also show that they think it is important to be in control and to solve problems yourself. In 2020 ECPAT carried out a survey of parents²¹. The survey showed that adults worry less about boys and don't talk to them as much about the risks associated with the internet and sexual exploitation. This silence results in boys finding it more difficult to seek support and they may feel that the adult world doesn't care.

²¹ ECPAT Sverige. "Vad föräldrar inte vet. Men behöver veta om barns tillvaro och risker på nätet." ECPAT (2021)

Discussion

Part of the solution will always be found among the children themselves and in their ability to be active agents in their own lives. This sometimes means behaving in a kind and decent way and actively deciding not to participate in activities around expose accounts.

IT WOULD BE NAIVE to believe that children hold the whole solution. We can see that many children visit expose accounts even though they themselves think it's wrong. Curiosity, fear and peer pressure are some of the reasons why individual children may act contrary to their own moral convictions. We also see that children often don't realise that their actions will have serious consequences for the children whose photos are exposed, and also that they try in various ways to minimise their own role

Curiosity, fear and peer pressure are some of the reasons why individual children may act contrary to their own moral convictions.

after they've visited an expose account. Just as with many internet-related phenomena, there is a sense that everybody plays some role in the problem, which can make it difficult for children to understand that their visiting the accounts is a serious matter. At the same time, the feeling that everyone has seen the photos is one of the things the victims of exposure find the most painful. Younger children see visiting expose accounts as less problematic than older children do. There is therefore a risk of the accounts becoming normalised.

Even the environment around the children sends signals that this phenomenon is not serious. The platforms have functionality that actively entices children to go to expose accounts. The judicial system has failed to communicate that they are taking this phenomenon seriously. School employees do not have sufficient knowledge about it and are not aware that expose accounts exist. According to the child-

ren in the survey, school staff seem to be troublingly passive in handling situations where students are being harassed and bullied after their photos have been shared on an expose account. It is therefore not surprising that children don't fully realise how serious it is to participate in expose accounts or the ensuing gossip and harassment. If the adult world wants children to take this issue seriously it is important for us to show them that we do.

It is crucial for the adult world to discuss the responsibility of the platforms and show their commitment to children. It is also important for the platforms to show that they are trying to tackle the problem. It is absurd for the major social media platforms to disclaim responsibility for their platforms being used to commit crimes targeting children and even contributing to the problem by enabling the spread through functionality on their platform. They are also slow to take down exploitative content and accounts that break the law and cause serious harm to individual children. It is time for the companies to explain what they intend to do about this problem and why they take a more serious view of disinformation spread by adults than of exploitative content of children being shared with both children and adults. It is reasonable to demand that platforms that invite children to use their services explain why they cannot act to prevent children from becoming victims of a crime or risk committing a crime themselves on these platforms.

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We see that many children visit expose accounts even though they themselves think it's wrong.

Our analysis also shows the children are well aware that the platforms could design their services differently and, in doing so, reduce both the extent

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and the duration of the harassment. It is important for both the judicial system and schools to realise that children's trust in them is relatively low. In the children's experience, neither the judicial system nor schools have the knowledge needed to tackle the criminal activity that is happening on expose accounts. Nor do they think that the judicial system or schools have the capacity to take the necessary steps to stop the expose accounts. Currently children feel as if society is signalling that the perpetrators of crimes can act with impunity, and that the support offered to the victims is weak at best. In the case of schools, this is particularly serious. Many of the children in the survey say that they have been victims of harassment and additional crimes during their school day and on school premises. In some cases, as a consequence, the child has stopped going to school and their school has failed to offer the relevant support. In order to offer the relevant support and information, various actors in society need to learn more about internet-related crimes.

Gossip, rumours and curiosity about the body and sex have always existed and have been enticing to many children. Bullying, harassment and blaming and shaming of girls for their sexuality and the sexual abuse they have been subjected to have unfortunately destroyed too many children's lives through the ages. What is different now is the tools that are being used and how they are

impacting the victims. Naked photos are a very potent weapon in harassment and shaming, and visual gossip is stronger than verbal gossip. The internet offers almost unlimited possibilities to share naked photos and videos to a wide audience. This also increases the risk of children becoming victims of additional crimes, including by unknown perpetrators.

The survey responses show that expose accounts – both local and global – have instilled fear in children, and above all girls. Half of the girls in the survey know someone who has been exposed through naked photos. The effects are that girls self-restrict, avoid sharing intimate content and in some cases judge others who do so. The perception of the naked body and sex as something shameful for girls has always existed in society, but expose accounts reinforce this perception and attach guilt and shame to girls' desires – often in combination with grossly misogynistic language. In this climate there is an increased risk that already vulnerable groups will be victimised, because we know that the likelihood of being exposed correlates with other risks of being harassed and subjected to sexual or physical violence. In the long term the adult world's lack of interest in acting to

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prevent expose accounts will result in mental health issues for children, failure at school and in the worst cases, self-harm and suicide.

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ECPAT demands

Amendment of child pornography laws

According to Swedish and international law, a child is a person under the age of 18. However, to be convicted of the crime that is misleadingly called a child pornography offence – in all forms of the offence except when depicting the child – Swedish law states that the child must not have completed puberty or that it is evident in the photo and from the circumstances around the photo that the person is under the age of 18, i.e. a child. It doesn't matter what the person who shared or is sharing the photo or video knows about the child's age when the child has already reached the end of puberty; it is not a child pornography offence if it is not clear from the photo or the circumstances around it. Children on expose accounts have often gone through puberty and sharing these photos is therefore not considered a child pornography offence. It may, however, be a different type of crime. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is incorporated into Swedish law. According to the Convention and its optional protocols, all children, regardless of puberty status, have the right to protection from sexual exploitation. The Swedish regulations on child pornography are thus in contravention of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has criticised Sweden for this. The commission that reviewed whether Swedish law is consistent with the Convention or not also recognised this. ECPAT's view is that removing the so-called puberty completion stipulation is long overdue. At ECPAT we have also advocated for several years to change the name of the offence. According to international guidelines developed jointly by actors such as Interpol, ECPAT International and UN organisations, the term child pornography is obsolete and misleading. Instead wording such as documented sexual offences against children or exploitative content is recommended. We are happy that a government commission is now reviewing the matter of changing the denomination of the offence. This report shows the serious

consequences that dissemination of exploitative content has on the child victims. Still, according to Swedish law, the so-called child pornography offence is not a sexual offence but instead a crime against public order. ECPAT considers the serious health-related consequences of the crime to justify it being regarded as a sexual offence against the child and nothing less than that.

Introduce strict liability

Strict liability in relation to the child's age in sexual offences against children would mean that it would no longer matter what the perpetrator knew, thought or should have understood about the child's age. It should be sufficient for the prosecutor to prove that the person that the perpetrator has, for example, committed a sexual offence against or possesses naked photos of, is under 18, i.e. a child. Normally, the law requires there to be criminal intent or negligence, and in a sexual offence against a child, it is sufficient in Swedish law for there to be negligence, in other words that the perpetrator at least should have understood that there was a risk of the child being under a certain age (18 or 15 years depending on the crime). ECPAT believes that strict liability should apply to sexual offences against children and that no child should need to be concerned about what the perpetrator should have known. This is something that the United Kingdom has already introduced and which the European Court has stated is fully consistent with the European Convention.

The platforms must take responsibility

ECPAT's view is that the platforms are not acting with sufficient force to reduce the number of expose accounts or to prevent children from becoming victims of offences. The platforms have a responsibility to remove or prevent the dissemination of messages where the content is clearly associated with certain stated crimes, including a child pornography offence.

Any platform that intentionally or through gross negligence violates the BBS Act is guilty of a crime that may be punishable by fines or up to two years in prison.

It can be argued that a platform, by not removing or preventing dissemination of exploitative content of children, for example, is guilty of a child pornography offence through a crime of omission. We have witnessed how, in the case of content linked to terrorism and disinformation about Covid-19 during the pandemic, the platforms have acted swiftly and effectively to prevent this content from being shared on their platforms. In the case of expose accounts, the platforms have failed to prevent the content from being uploaded. In addition, they have contributed to systematic harassment of victims of crimes and exposed other children to crimes by recommending that children visit and follow expose accounts.

Introduce initiatives to increase knowledge and awareness about expose accounts

The adults in the children's proximity – parents and those who work with children – need to increase their knowledge and awareness about this type of crime. They also need to understand that what happens on the internet has serious consequences in all aspects of a child's life. The first step in achieving this is to accept the lack of knowledge and seek help from actors – academics and non-governmental actors (NGOs) – who have relevant knowledge about expose accounts to ensure that any steps taken are relevant for children. It is important not to reduce this to an issue that NGOs need to solve. Instead society must take responsibility for protecting the rights of all children.

Prioritise investigating sexual offences against children

There is often substantial evidence when the perpetrator and victim of a crime are identified in

cases involving expose accounts. However, the police seem to give low priority to cases involving self-produced content where both the victim and the perpetrator are children. Children also say that their cases are often dropped and that the sharing of photos continues.

In autumn 2022 the number of reports made to the ECPAT Hotline about expose accounts increased exponentially. They were often reported by children who themselves were victims. Since it is children who are often exposed in naked photos that include their personal information, we act swiftly to contact the police and social services to ensure that the child can receive the support and protection they have a right to. Due to the current laws, the police treat these incidents as an unlawful breach of privacy and thus the cases do not get referred to regional IT crime units that have specialists in digital sexual offences against children. It is therefore even more important to change the law so that these crimes are prioritised based on their severity. In conversations with children and their parents/guardians we have learnt that incidents have been reported to the police on several occasions, but the cases have been dropped and the children continue to be victimised because the photos and contact information are allowed to continue circulating online. While waiting for a change in the law, the police must prioritise allocating resources so that these serious crimes are investigated and punished.

In this report we have shown how the victimisation of children on expose accounts has devastating and lasting consequences for the victim. If the judicial system and society does not act immediately, expose accounts will likely continue to grow, become normalised and foster an internet culture where children can degrade and stalk each other in a climate where there is no accountability and minimal risk of punishment.

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