

**”I WOULDN’T COUNT**

**THIS AS NORMAL**

**TRADITIONAL SEX,**

**BUT IT IS A FORM**

**OF SEX.”**

**A report on children’s and adolescents’ views  
on sexuality, consent and relationships online.**



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ECPAT Sverige, 2022

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The images in this report are generic images, and the people in the images do not have any connection to the content or quotes in the report.

## **ECPAT Sweden**

ECPAT Sweden is a children's rights organisation working against sexual exploitation of children. We share knowledge about sexual crime to prevent it from happening. We work to inform public opinion and influence decision makers, and we collaborate with authorities, private businesses and other organisations. We have three operational activities: ECPAT Hotline – a reporting site, as well as Ditt ECPAT – a support line for children and young people, and Vuxenstöd for parents and other adults.



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**"WE FOUND EACH OTHER'S**

**SNAPCHAT THROUGH HANDBALL**

**AND STARTED SEXTING,**

**AND THEN SENDING PICTURES"**

Girl, 17 years old



# Preface

**This report** is about the way children and adolescents view sex and sexual exploration online. Exploring sexuality safely and securely is a fundamental right and an important part of the well-being and health of the child. ECPAT Sweden (ECPAT) works with children who have been sexually abused or who have sexually abused others. Thousands of children turn to us every year with questions about the dissemination of nude images, sexual abuse and consent. In step with technological developments, much of children's and adolescents' relationships have moved online, along with their exploration of sexuality and sex, which is made clear by the quote on the left.

Having sex online can include, for example, sharing nude images, sending sexual messages and masturbating together in front of a webcam. This can be a healthy way for children to approach their own sexuality with curiosity. To ensure that children can explore their sexuality online safely, it is necessary that they are aware of their rights, of the rules that apply online and offline, and of when they have been the victim of a crime or when they themselves subject someone else to a crime.

As adults, it is our responsibility to have a dialogue with children as they explore their sexuality, and the more we adults understand and learn, the more we can implement preventive measures and support children, allowing safe and secure exploration.

This report is for all adults who come into contact with children in their day-to-day lives and in their professional lives, and it is our hope that it will contribute to conversations that reduce the gap between children's, adolescents' and adults' views on sexuality, consent and relationships online, and provide a more relevant and credible definition of sex – both online and offline.

**A big thank you** to all the children and adolescents who have taken part in the questionnaire and the focus groups, and who have so bravely shared their experiences and knowledge. We will safeguard the trust you have shown us.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A K H B'.

**Anna Karin Hildingson Boqvist**  
Secretary General, ECPAT Sweden

# Summary

**One important part of** the efforts to protect children from sexual abuse and harassment is enabling adults who are close to the child to provide tools for managing the risks that arise during the child's exploration of their own sexuality. The campaign 'Stopp! Min kropp!' (Stop! My body!), discussions with children about consent, #metoo, and information for children from UMO and RFSU all play an important part in spreading awareness about what is right and wrong in sexual interactions, while also conveying a fundamentally positive message about sex and intimacy. In these efforts, individual adults also have a great

responsibility. This issue is not normally the main topic in ECPAT's reports, since our efforts are focused on combating the sexual exploitation of children. However, in our major 'Nude på nätet' (Nude online) survey, we noticed that children's sexual exploration is increasingly taking place online. From the child's perspective, this is mainly unproblematic; however, it is

clear that adults possess little understanding of this aspect of children's sexuality and rarely discuss it with them. When adults discuss children's sexual acts online, it is generally assumed that these are negative, and are something that children are cajoled into and do not seek for themselves. This lack of understanding can lead adults to blame or punish sexual expressions that are natural between children and young people today.

**It is important to understand how children view online sexual acts in order to increase understanding among the adults who are close to them.**

If children are blamed by adults, it can discourage them from seeking help from the adult world. For this reason, ECPAT believes that understanding the way in which children view online sexual acts is important in order to increase understanding among adults who are close to children, to design support based on children's needs, and to create a dialogue about what sex, consent and relationships online entail.

When children describe sending nude images, it is clear that this is taking place in a borderland between the traditional and the new forms of

sexual acts that has been created by technological developments. To ensure that children's exploration of their sexuality is safe, and to protect children from the risk of sexual abuse, or of sexually abusing others, we must broaden our understanding of what children consider to be sex and sexual acts online.

When it comes to children's and adolescents' views on sexuality, consent and relationships, their own ambivalence regarding the concept of sex is of central importance when this happens over the Internet. It is clear that one of the reasons for this is the fact that the idea of defining these interactions as sex was new to many of the children in the focus groups.





## The law is clear that sexual acts that take place digitally are just as serious as physical sexual acts.

The idea that a nude image, or masturbating together in front of a camera, could actually be sex was initially dismissed as being 'not sex,' before later being compared to a physical one-night stand, which fulfilled the children's own criteria for what sex is. It became obvious that children had rarely discussed this, and they often felt that nude images were something that adults expected to be problematic. It is not difficult to imagine that this is due, at least in part, to the various ways in which the adult world communicates that physical sex is real sex, while remaining very quiet about what sex in a digital context might be. Technological developments have changed the ways in which children explore their sexuality, and children and adolescents are having sex in a new way today. Conversations about sex must be based on the reality in which children and adolescents live.

The law is clear that sexual acts that take place digitally are just as serious as physical sexual acts. This means that sexual offences online are just as serious as sexual offences offline, which we know many children are not aware about. In the long run, this ignorance could lead to children, without being aware of it, being subjected, or subjecting someone else, to serious sexual offences. For this reason, it is important that adults, in dialogue with children, broaden the ordinary definition of sex to include adolescents' sexual activities, wherever these take place.



# Introduction

Since 2020, ECPAT has conducted a narrative-based questionnaire, 'Nude på nätet' (Nude online). In 2020, we investigated where children drew the line in online sexual grey areas, and, in 2021, we chose to focus on children's strategies to protect themselves from sexual offences. A total of 12,836 unique responses were received in 2021. Of these, at least 1,504 gave at least one free-text response, and there were a total of almost 4,000 free-text responses to the questionnaire. During the process of analysing the responses to the questionnaire, we could clearly observe that technological developments have changed children's sexual exploration and relationships.

In recent decades, a number of different surveys have investigated the sexual health of children and adolescents and their vulnerability to sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup> In these surveys, the definition of sex is narrow (oral, genital or vaginal intercourse) and generally reflects a traditional norm. It is not unlikely that these surveys are also representative of the information children receive about what sex means, which may explain why the idea that sex can take place over the Internet is so alien to the children in the focus groups. Some of the largest of these surveys include 'UngKAB09', 'UngKAB15' and 'Unga, sex och internet efter #metoo' (Young people, sex and the Internet after #metoo). Common to all of the surveys is that the definition of sex does not take into account, or only takes into account to a small extent, the ways in which the children and adolescents themselves define sex, consent and relationships online. In the report 'Unga, sex och internet efter #metoo' (Young

people, sex and the Internet after #metoo), the authors define sex as follows: *Almost 65 per cent of all adolescents reported having had sex (defined as oral, genital or vaginal intercourse) – 62 per cent of the boys and 68 per cent of the girls. The mean age of sexual debut was 15.7 years (SD = 1.5) for both genders.*<sup>2</sup>

**12,836 UNIQUE RESPONSES.**

**4,000 FREE-TEXT RESPONSES.**

In a UNICEF report, the authors note that research into children's sexual activities online has focused too much on behaviours that are aberrant and harmful. For this reason, the report calls for more research into the positive effects of children's sexual activities online, and for more knowledge about the function these activities have for children's experience of intimacy, relationships and the desire to learn more about sex.<sup>3</sup> The authors believe, as does ECPAT, that broadening our understanding of children's experiences is necessary, in order to make exploration safer and to best protect children from being sexually abused or abusing others. This can also serve to initiate a dialogue with children and adolescents about what sex is and what it can be.

We therefore chose to invite 16 children, aged 14-17 years old, to give us a deeper understanding of the way children and adolescents view the issues of sexuality, consent and relationships online.

1 See, for example, Svedin, C. G., Landberg, Å., & Jonsson, L. (2021). Unga, sex och internet efter #metoo: Om ungdomars sexualitet och utsatthet för sexuella övergrepp och sexuell exploatering i Sverige 2020/2021 (Young people, sex and Internet after #metoo: On adolescents' sexuality and vulnerability to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in Sweden 2020/2021); Tikkanen, R. H., Abellsson, J., & Forsberg, M. (2011). UngKAB09 - Kunskap, attityder och sexuella handlingar bland unga; Folkhälsomyndigheten (UngKAB09 - Knowledge, attitudes and sexual acts among adolescents; The Public Health Agency of Sweden, F.H.M.) (2017). Sexualitet och hälsa bland unga i Sverige - UngKAB15 - en studie om kunskap, attityder och beteende bland unga 16-29 år (Sexuality and health among

adolescents in Sweden - UngKAB15 - a study on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour among adolescents 16-29 years old).

2 Svedin, C. G., Landberg, Å., & Jonsson, L. (2021). Unga, sex och internet efter #metoo: Om ungdomars sexualitet och utsatthet för sexuella övergrepp och sexuell exploatering i Sverige 2020/2021. (On adolescents' sexuality and vulnerability to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in Sweden 2020/2021).

3 Stoilova, M., Livingstone, S., & Khazbak, R. (2021). Investigating risks and opportunities for children in a digital world: A rapid review of the evidence on children's internet use and outcomes.



## Our approach

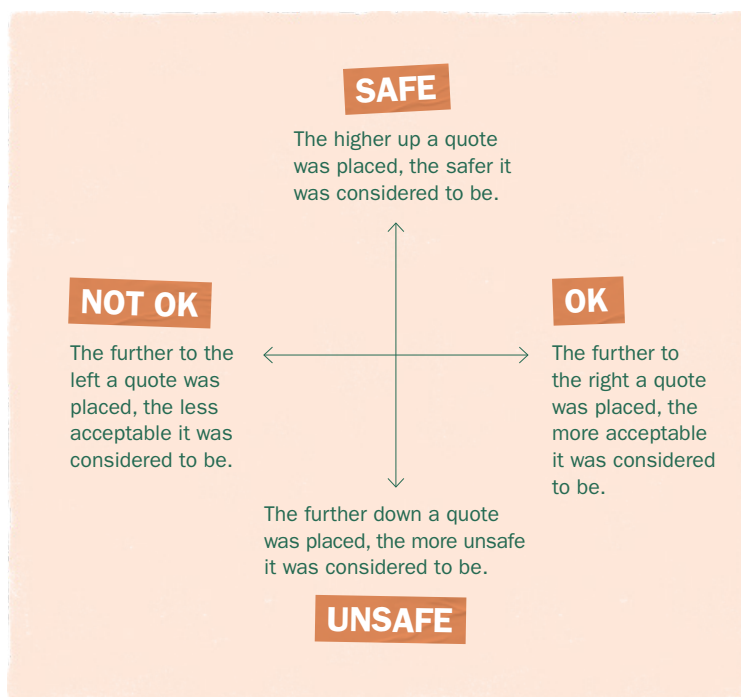
**ECPAT considers** children to be experts on their own situation, and their experiences and knowledge must be taken seriously. For us, this means that children know their situation best, and can both identify problems and find solutions.

In the 2021 'Nude på nätet' (Nude online) questionnaire, we received a large number of free-text responses showing that children are exploring their sexuality online in a way that has not been captured in other surveys. However, these free-text responses do not show how common such exploration is, or how it is judged by children in general. In our opinion, one way to understand and develop the free-text responses from the survey is to invite other children to collectively analyse both the patterns in the overall responses and the individual free-text responses. This will not necessarily reflect the experiences of the children who provided the individual free-text responses, but based on how other children interpret a statement or pattern, it can help to contextualise these responses. Since the theme of this report focuses on the ways in which children view the issues of sexuality, consent and relationships online, and the role that is played in this by sending nude images, this becomes a subject that concerns all children, and where all children will have their own interpretation.

**We believe therefore that it is important for children's voices and children's experiences to be part of the process.**

The focus groups consisted of groups of 3-5 children, who were allowed to discuss a number of free-text responses concerning sex online from the 'Nude på nätet' (Nude online) questionnaire, with examples including the sending of nude images, videos and masturbating together.<sup>4</sup>

These quotes were representative in the sense that they reflected the important themes that were identified in the children's responses, while being slightly longer and clearer than many others. They were not, however, arranged thematically, and these themes were not presented to the children in the focus groups. The free-text responses were also made gender-neutral by replacing each pronoun with a gender-neutral alternative ('they' has been used in the English translation). After the children had been presented with a response, they were asked to place it in a four-field matrix (see the table below).



<sup>4</sup> All free-text responses are available in Appendix 1.

GENDER DISTRIBUTION	AGE	DISPOSITION
Focus Group 1: 3 girls/2 boys	14-17 years old	They know each other, strong inclination towards consensus. They place the quotes differently, but still seek a common basis for explanation.
Focus Group 2: 2 girls/3 boys	14-17 years old	They know each other, some inclination towards consensus. Strong statements are willingly toned down if the group thinks differently, but there is room for, and willingness to, express different opinions within the group.
Focus Group 3: 3 girls	14-15 years old	They know each other, little attempt to search for consensus. The children describe their own positions and accept different positions.
Focus Group 4: 2 girls/1 boy	14-15 years old	They know each other, some inclination towards consensus. When there are different understandings in the group, the children try to find common denominators in their respective interpretations.

Depending on where the child placed the free-text response, there then followed a discussion where the children could explain why they had placed it where they did and whether they thought the response came from a girl or a boy. These responses opened up for further considerations and in-depth discussion. The discussion was recorded, and later served as source data for our analysis.

We had two meetings with the children in the focus groups. On the first occasion, there were 10 children who knew one another from a recreational activity, and on the second occasion, six children who knew each other from school and recreational activities. The children were not selected at random, but they were selected to represent a wide range of experiences and socioeconomic background factors. One advantage of selecting the children in this

way was that they were already in contact with one another and were confident about talking about the subject in the group. Originally, the idea was to allocate the children into same-sex groups, since views on sexuality, consent and relationships can be sensitive topics, which are most easily discussed together with other children of the same sex. However, the children preferred to divide up the groups differently. Above, we present the composition of the groups and how we interpreted the disposition within each group. In the analysis, we will use quotes from the focus groups, instead of summarising what the children said. By presenting their responses in their own words, we minimise the risk that we would try to interpret what the children were actually saying. The choice of quotes aims to be both representative and to highlight the breadth of the children's reasoning.



# Relationships, sex and sexual acts

**When children and adolescents** describe what the Internet means to them, it is clear that the line dividing the physical and the digital reality is not as sharp for them as it is for the majority of adults. When it concerns relationships online, these two worlds overlap to a large degree. This does not imply that life online and life offline are identical, or that everything that happens in the one has an



**The line dividing the physical and the digital reality is not as sharp for them as it is for the majority of adults.**

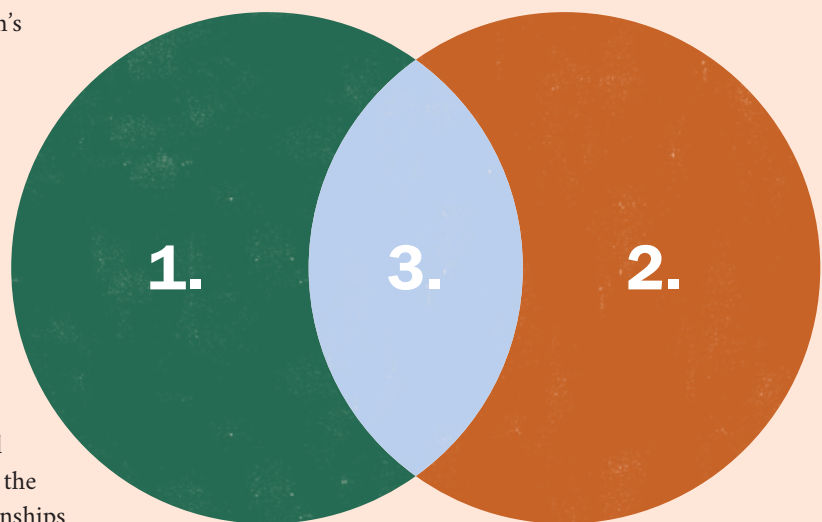
effect on - or has an equivalent in - the other. Slightly simplified, relationships online and offline are two partially overlapping spheres, where some parts are separated from

one another while others form communicating vessels. In the figure below, we can see a simple presentation of the children's relationships.

The field marked 1 contains those parts of the child's relationships that are primarily connected to the physical world, while being separate from the child's digital world. Here we find large parts of the adult world, including parents, teachers and other adults who are close to the child. The field marked 2 contains the child's digital relationships that are separate from the child's physical world. These relationships range from deep and long-lasting friendships

to anonymous, short interactions that sometimes only exist for a few hours. The field marked 3 contains the relationships that have a clear presence in both the child's physical and digital worlds. These include many of the child's contacts with their peers of the same age, such as friends, schoolmates, and acquaintances whom they meet in both physical and digital contexts.

The boundaries between these fields are porous, and it is possible for a relationship to move between them based on the child's active choices. For example, this happens when a relationship that begins online transitions into a relationship that also includes physical meetings, or when a friend from the Internet is introduced to friends whom the child also meets physically.



Historically, children and adolescents' sexual exploration and experiences generally took place in a group that corresponds, today, to field 3 – i.e., among peers of roughly the same age in the child's local area, where each individual knows who the other person is. Via the Internet and technological innovations - for instance, smartphones with built-in cameras - the child has an opportunity to expand their sexual exploration and experimentation into field 2. This can entail many benefits for the individual child. Firstly, the child can meet others in a relatively safe and anonymous way, and explore sides of their sexuality that would be much more difficult to find an expression for anywhere else. Secondly, certain types of risks, such as the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, disappear. In some cases, the digital sphere involves increased risks, such as the dissemination of intimate images or blackmail. The transferring of sexual exploration and sexual practice into the digital sphere is creating a need for children to negotiate the meaning of their and society's norms concerning the issues of sexuality, relationships, consent and their own agency.

In this report, we highlight the ways in which our focus groups view the topics of sex and relationships in order to navigate a landscape in which the meaning of relationships is rapidly changing.



# The children's analysis of sex and sexual acts online

The children in the focus groups had to give an opinion on thirteen quotes from the free-text responses in the survey, all of which represented recurring themes that we had observed when we analysed the material. Above all, there were three quotes that sparked discussions in the focus groups about the question of what sex is and what it is not:

## QUOTE 1

**"We started writing, it took a couple of days before we flirted with each other, and things started to heat up. After teasing one another, he finally sent a picture and then we sent pictures and videos until we came. It happened once again later on in the week, but after that we stopped talking (before we met). I don't regret anything, but we should have waited a bit before sending pictures."**

Boy, 17 years old

## QUOTE 2

**"I like getting paid to send nudes. It's an easy way to earn money."**

Girl, 17 years old

## QUOTE 3

**"We chatted and I got horny, and it's happened several times."**

Girl, 13 years old

**Usually, the children's initial reaction** was that what had happened in these quotes could not be counted as sex. Below, two of the children develop their argument.

*"I consider sex to be more like two people having actual intercourse, that there are two people in the same room." (Girl, Focus Group 3)*

*"Sex is when a child can be conceived." (Boy, Focus Group 2)*

What we can observe from the quotes above is that the children's initial interpretation of sex was normative, and consistent with a narrow definition of sex, in that it took place physically and involved sexual intercourse. In the second quote, we can also see that the interpretation of sex was even more limited to involving two people of the opposite sex and vaginal intercourse. However, this initial interpretation was problematised as soon as the children were asked to define what the individuals in the quotes were doing. In this problematisation, the children often identified themselves that their first definition of sex had been narrow.

*"It's like porn but you are chatting... like phone sex but in picture and film format." (Boy, Focus Group 4)*

*"It's not that different to a one-night stand with someone you met at a party." (Girl, Focus Group 3)*

*"It's the same as when adults go to a bar to pick someone up." (Girl, Focus Group 4)*

In three of the four focus groups, the children defined what had happened as bordering on sex, but felt that, at the same time, it was distinctly separate from what they regarded as normal sex.

*"I wouldn't count this as normal, traditional sex, but it is a form of sex." (Girl, Focus Group 3)*

## The children's first interpretation of sex was normative, and consistent with a narrow definition of sex.

In one of the groups, a child highlighted the benefits of sex online compared to physical sex.

*"With physical sex, a lot can happen. There could be abuse, the other party might change their mind in the middle of things. You need to be able to trust them." (Boy, Focus Group 2)*

It is not entirely clear what reasonable interpretation can be made of these statements and of the children's shifting in meaning

between sex and sexual acts. In a society where the norm is that penetration constitutes sex, it is not unexpected that the distinction between 'real' sex and sexual acts is maintained. It is also likely that children - both now and in the past - may have made distinctions between sex, defined as sexual intercourse, and other sexual acts, such as making out and mutual masturbation. There may have been a similar distinction between sexual acts with a casual sexual contact and the same acts with a permanent partner. Considered from this perspective, the children's responses appear to point to a separation between, on the one hand, sexual intercourse as unambiguous sex and, on the other, sexual acts with significantly more diffuse boundaries and meanings.

To understand the differentiation that children make between a sexual act on the Internet and sex, we need a deeper understanding of the ways in which children interpret relationships, intentions, consent and agency in the digital space. This will be examined in the following analysis, and it will become clear that children's interpretations of sex and sexual acts change depending on a wide range of factors. This creates an ambiguity concerning the definition of sex that predates the Internet, but where the Internet's new arenas are creating new boundaries and negotiations.



# The view of sex in relationships online

**When the children discuss** their view of sexuality and relationships online, it is clear that both the motive behind a sexual act, for example sending a nude image, and the relationship with the recipient plays an important role. The children have more understanding for sexual acts online with people with whom the child has a long-term relationship and especially if the relationship is romantic. The online sexual act, in this case, is considered to be a way to compensate for the fact that they cannot meet as often as they want, and as a substitute for physical contact.

*"It's a way for them to keep the flame alive between them. It's just a way to try to make it work for them."* (Boy, Focus Group 1)

At the same time, the children had very different perceptions of what applied if the people in the relationship only socialised online, which becomes clear from the quotes below.

*"It's a little weird. Having a relationship on Snapchat is not normal."* (Girl, Focus Group 1)

*"When everything is digital and everything happens over the Internet, you might perhaps find the one*

*you you like by chatting with them, and it's not all that different from having met face to face."* (Girl, Focus Group 4)

*"I'm thinking corona... that we don't meet people as much as we did, and I think more people are having long-distance relationships now than before corona."* (Girl, Focus Group 3)

Children's duality regarding digital romantic relationships, however, did not apply to the question of whether it was possible to have meaningful relationships online, but rather that romantic relationships were a special case. The children saw shorter digital relationships as normal but, in some cases, they were hesitant about how appropriate it was to take part in sexual activities during such contacts.

*"I'd say that if you're in a relationship, if you're in a serious relationship with a person, it's safer than if you are strangers."* (Girl, Focus Group 3)

*"I think you should be able to exercise a little self-control and, even if you're turned on, you should be able to keep your business in your pants and control yourself, it's that simple."* (Girl, Focus Group 2)



In this case, there were also children who saw problems with a short-term contact, which could entail making hasty decisions, because it is easy to be affected by the mood of the moment.

*"Is sending pictures when you're horny a good idea? Will you take responsibility for it afterwards?"*  
(Girl, Focus Group 3)

A recurring theme among the children was that, in these contacts, there was frequently some doubt about who the recipient was.

*"They can catfish, it's 2022, stay woke."* (Girl, Focus Group 1)

The quotes also included examples of children who sent images to unknown, anonymous recipients out of curiosity, for affirmation or to obtain money. When it came to these interactions, the children in the focus groups were generally very sceptical, and considered it to be problematic behaviour.

*"When I think about why you should send nude pictures, it's because you have an intimate*

*relationship just with each other. This is the wrong way, the wrong purpose, because in this case you're sort of giving up your body for others to judge."*  
(Girl, Focus Group 4)

*"I see this as a sexual act. Sexual acts should happen with someone you trust."* (Boy, Focus Group 1)

## The relationship between the person who sends and the person who receives the image is key.

When we look at the ways in which the children describe sending nude images, it becomes clear that the relationship between the person who sends and the person who receives the image is key, and the closer the relationship, the more it is accepted. One interesting aspect of this is that the children describe sending images using more sexual terms as the social distance between the person sending and the person receiving the image increases and the children's acceptance decreases. This suggests that there is a sexual component to sending nude images, of which the children are aware, and where there is a clear hierarchy for when the sending of such images is acceptable and when it is unacceptable.



# Agency and consent in a digital environment

When it comes to consent, the children show an ambivalence about where the boundary for a valid consent runs between two people.

**The question of one's own agency** and the other party's consent was absolutely crucial for whether the children considered the sexual act to be acceptable or unacceptable. These two aspects - firstly, the sender's sincere desire to send the image and, secondly, that the recipient genuinely wants the image - were often interwoven and problematised in the children's responses.

*"I think it was okay, because both of them seem to like it. If they both like it, why not?" (Boy, Focus Group 2)*

*"It didn't say anything about the other person. It looks like they were talking and one of them got turned on and sent a picture, and I do not think that's OK." (Girl, Focus Group 3)*

When it comes to consent, the children show an ambivalence about where the boundary for valid consent is drawn between two people. This goes beyond the idea that you only need to agree to participate in a sexual act - for example, by sending or receiving a nude image - for it to be acceptable.

*"They're not pressured by the person, they're pressured by the norm. You send it because you don't want to be the boring one, the one who won't, the one who doesn't dare. It's not OK." (Girl, Focus Group 3)*

In some cases, the children in the focus groups feel that the reason for having sex online invalidates the person's consent, even when the person in the quote makes it clear that they are willing.

*"This [sending images to people you do not know] just shows that there is something wrong with them, that they must have some disorder or something." (Boy, Focus Group 2)*

*"The more you do it, the worse the addiction becomes. It's the same as when you smoke for the first time. If you continue, it gets harder to quit."*  
(Girl, Focus Group 3)

The pathological language, and the link to addiction and mental illness in the children's reasoning, demonstrates that they believe that people who impulsively engage in sexual acts, with strangers and perhaps primarily for affirmation, cannot really take responsibility for their own actions. This is in sharp contrast to other responses, where there is a focus on self-determination and one's own agency. Some of the children take a similar view of children who sell images.

*"She is belittling herself. She doesn't have any self-respect, because she is selling pictures of herself so people can enjoy her for money."* (Girl, Focus Group 1)

However, the children who were critical of selling images were in the minority. Instead, the majority referred to both the right to self-determination and consent to justify it as being acceptable.

*"I think it's totally okay. She enjoys it and gets money for it."* (Girl, Focus Group 1)

*"I feel that this is something they have both approved. The one sending nudes has decided that they want to send nudes, and the one who receives them clearly wants them and is willing to pay."* (Girl, Focus Group 3)

This touches on an interesting aspect of the children's view of consent and sexual acts that differs from consent in the physical world. For many children, consent in the digital world does not seem to be about both of the parties necessarily looking for the same thing, and this is often seen to be relatively unproblematic. An example could be that one of the parties is feeling horny and wants images, and the person sending the images wants money.

*"It perhaps isn't ideal or something you should aim for,*

*but if they talk and both of them get something out of it, I can still think it's okay."* (Girl, Focus Group 4)

In one of the focus groups, the children raised another reason for why consent was not necessarily valid. This concerned whether or not there was a clear difference in age between the person who sent and the person who received the image, where the age difference itself was seen as problematic, even though both of them gave their consent to the sending of the images. In this case, it was clear that the older person was considered to have a responsibility not to send nude images to younger children.

*"If you're the same age, it's fine, but if you're 13 and the other's 16, it's creepy and weird. It's wrong."*  
(Girl, Focus Group 4)

*"One problem is that you have no idea who you're sending the pictures to. The person sending might send to someone who is very young, and that doesn't feel okay."* (Girl, Focus Group 4)

One's own agency and consent are consistently important in the ways in which children discuss sending nude images on the Internet. In general, it was considered acceptable if both the person sending and the person receiving the image are willing, and have clearly communicated what they want. However, the children were clear that willingness or giving consent did not necessarily make sending acceptable. In cases where the person who sent did so to obtain affirmation or out of curiosity, the children were doubtful about whether this should count as valid consent, and they were generally critical of the idea that it involved a choice that was made without pressure. In one of the groups, the children also stressed that young children should be protected to some degree from sexual acts with older children. The children do not give a clear boundary for these differences, but the presence of a boundary seems to reflect, at least partially, a realisation that children under the age of 15 cannot consent to sex.

# What does sex online mean for children and adolescents?

**It is clear**, when children describe sending nude images, that this is taking place in a borderland between the traditional and the new forms of sexual acts that has been created by technological developments. We can observe that the reasons for sexual encounters online are the same as the reasons for getting sexually involved offline - building intimacy and trust, sexual desire, flirting, curiosity and affirmation - although the significance of these feelings cannot be translated directly. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the number of people with whom children can explore their sexuality has multiplied, and they no longer need to be in the child's vicinity or to even have any relationship with the child. To ensure that children's exploration of their sexuality is safe, and to prevent the risk of



**We can observe that the reasons for sexual encounters online are the same as the reasons for getting sexually involved offline.**

them being subjected, or subjecting others, to sexual abuse, it is necessary to broaden our understanding of what children consider to constitute sex and sexual acts online.

The change in the ways in which children can explore their

sexuality has also entailed a renegotiation of what is meant by consent. Just as in the physical world, children say that reciprocity and consent are key elements for sexual acts to be acceptable online. However, it is not equally clear to the children who can consent to sexual acts, what consent means between, for example, people who did not previously know one another, or how one should approach nagging or norms in these interactions.

After all, of key importance to all of these issues is the children's own ambivalence to the concept of sex when it is something that happens over the Internet. It is clear that one of the reasons for this is the fact that the idea of defining these interactions

as sex was new to many of the children in the focus groups. The idea that a nude image, or masturbating together in front of a camera, could actually be sex was initially dismissed as being 'not sex,' before later being compared to a physical one-night stand, which fulfilled the children's own criteria for what sex is. It was obvious

that the children had rarely discussed this, and that they often felt that nude images were something that the adults expected to be problematic.

The fact that children and adults have different perceptions of what counts and what does not count as sex may seem unproblematic at first glance, but in order for children to be able to explore their sexuality safely, adults need to open up for a dialogue with children, where the children's thoughts, knowledge and experience are important aspects. In order for children to be protected when they are exploring their sexuality, and for them not to be prevented from exploring it, adults need to ensure that children also have information about what is and what is not legal with regard to sexuality, consent and relationships online.

**The change in the ways in which children can explore their sexuality has also entailed a renegotiation of what is meant by consent.**





**"IF THEY**

**BOTH LIKE IT,**

**WHY NOT?"**





# What does the legislation say about sex online?

**In this report**, we focus on children's views on the issues of sexuality, consent and relationships online, but what is the actual legal position? As a result of the ongoing technological developments, politicians in the Swedish parliament and the justices of the Supreme Court have been facing challenges: can sexual intercourse or another sexual act be performed with another person over the Internet? In other words, can sexual acts be performed online? The answer of the Swedish parliament and of the Supreme Court is yes, which does not fully correspond to children's and adolescent's views on sex.

Just as for offline, the voluntary participation of all those involved is a fundamental condition in order for the act to be regarded as sex, and not as rape or another form of sexual assault. This is sometimes referred to as consent. In Sweden, children can consent to have sex once they have reached the age of 15. Children under the age of 15 are not able to consent to sex; instead, any person who has sexual intercourse with such a child is, as a general rule, guilty of the rape of child. The exception is in cases where there is little difference in the age and maturity of those involved and it is obvious that it does not constitute abuse – for example, between a child who is about to turn 15 and a child who is 15 years old, where the participation of both is voluntarily.

When it comes to sex, the legislation makes a distinction between sexual intercourse and sexual acts. Sexual intercourse still refers to vaginal intercourse, but, at the time of writing, a proposal is being prepared at Sweden's Ministry of Justice to expand the definition of intercourse to also include oral and anal intercourse. A sexual act refers to an act that triggers or satisfies the sexual desire of one or more of the people involved. This can involve anything from oral sex to masturbation.

In other words, the people involved are not required to be in the same place in order for it to be legally regarded as sex; it is possible to have sex online. One requirement is, however, that everyone is involved in real time, for example via video chat. In the legislator's opinion, filming oneself performing a sexual act and later sending the film to someone else does not count as having sex with that person, as all parties must participate in real time. There are, however, proposals for the abolition of the so-called real-time requirement in this case.

In summary, it can be said that what is regarded to be sex offline is also sex online, and, just as sex offline can take many different forms, this is also the case online.

# Discussion

**With this report**, ECPAT wants to broaden the knowledge within society about the ways in which children and adolescents view sex, consent and relationships online. By listening to children, we have been able to observe that children consider exploring their sexuality online to be natural, but that they rarely talk to adults about it. This creates a knowledge gap between children and adults that can lead to children being subjected, or subjecting others, to sexual offences without being aware of it.

It is clear that the children in the analysis groups make a distinction between sex (which for them means physical intercourse) and sexual acts that take place over the Internet. The children's initial reaction is to define the former as 'real sex', and the latter as 'sexual acts'. However, if we take a closer look at the children's reasoning, it is

## Children consider exploring their sexuality online as natural, but rarely talk to adults about it.

evident that the difference is not only between the physical and the digital, but also depends on the context and purposes for which the sexual act is performed. For example, children compare masturbating together, where images and videos are sent between those involved, to being a substitute for porn, such as phone sex over the Internet or a physical one-night stand. It also becomes clear that the context in which the sexual act takes place is important for the children's interpretation of the act. Sending nude images in long-term romantic relationships is seen as understandable, natural and fundamentally positive, whilst images sent to strangers for affirmation are interpreted as being destructive, pathological and fundamentally negative. A sexual act, as part of a flirtation or for explicit sexual purposes, falls between these two extremes.



## There are differing opinions among the children about what constitutes valid consent, and the level of awareness of who can consent to sexual acts online is low.

The children in the focus groups emphasise the exercising of one's own responsibility and own judgement as a way of ensuring that sending images does not lead to negative consequences.

Another area where there are clear links between the children's reasoning about sexual acts in the physical and the digital environments is their view of consent. The children are very clear that consent is required from both of those participating in the sexual activity. In cases where there is no consent, or where consent has been manipulated via nagging, threats or lies, the children make it clear that a violation was committed by the offending party. However, there are differing opinions among the children about what constitutes valid consent, and the level of awareness of who can consent to sexual acts online is low. One example of this is when a child sells images for payment, and a paid consent is seen as acceptable by a majority of the children. The question is how this affects the view of those children who are victims of

a crime, such as, for example, having had their images disseminated.

The children's ambivalence and uncertainty about what counts as real sex is clear from their reasoning. It is not difficult to imagine that this is due, at least partially, to the adult world communicating that physical sex is real sex, while staying quiet - and being ignorant - about what sex is in a digital context. At the same time, the law is very clear that sexual acts that take place digitally have the same significance as physical sexual acts. This means that sexual offences online are just as serious as sexual offences offline, which we know many children are not aware of. In the long run, this ignorance could lead to children, without being aware of it, being subjected, or subjecting someone else, to serious sexual offences. For this reason, it is important that adults, in dialogue with children, broaden the definition of sex to include young people's sexual practices, wherever these take place.



## Appendix 1. The children's free-text responses

1. I sent pictures to my then-partner who, for months, I'd only known on Snapchat (They were kind and we saw each other a lot later on, and were together for a long time).	<i>Girl, 17</i> Long-term relationship, building/maintaining relationship
2. It has happened a hundred times. Usually, it's just flirting online, and you start taking more and more daring pictures of yourself until the point when the other asks for a nude, and I don't think it's a big deal if we're both fine with it and our faces are not shown.	<i>Girl, 16</i> Short-term relationship, flirting
3. I was feeling down and seeking affirmation, then I realised that I enjoyed it and continued.	<i>Girl, 16</i> No relationship, affirmation
4. We started writing, it took a couple of days before we flirted with each other and then things started to heat up. After teasing one another, they finally sent a picture and then we sent pictures and videos until we came. It happened once again later on in the week, but after that we stopped talking (before we met). I don't regret anything, but we should have waited a bit before sending pictures.	<i>Boy, 17</i> Short-term relationship, sexual stimulation
5. I like getting paid to send nudes. It's an easy way to earn money.	<i>Girl, 17</i> No relationship, money
6. It was a long-distance relationship as we lived 100 km from each other, and we exchanged pictures simply as a couple who couldn't meet very often.	<i>Boy, 16</i> Long-term relationship, building/maintaining relationship
7. Me and my friend just do stuff like that at times. We send our nudes, it's no big deal. I trust them.	<i>Non-binary, 13</i> Long-term relationship, building/maintaining relationship
8. I've sent pictures to a few different people who I don't know, but honestly, I don't care very much if they're spread, I'm always careful not to show my face.	<i>Girl, 15</i> No relationship, unclear reason
9. We chatted and I got horny, and it's happened several times.	<i>Girl, 13</i> Short-term relationship, sexual stimulation

<p>10. A random person added me. They wanted nudes, I said they had to send first and they did, asked me not to take any screenshots, and they seemed reasonable. We never talked again. No faces, no names.</p>	<p><i>Boy, 16</i> No relationship, unclear reason</p>
<p>11. We found each other on Yubo/ through friends who gave a shout out, added each other on Snapchat, became close, they asked for it or started sending.</p>	<p><i>Girl, 16</i> Short-term relationship, flirting</p>
<p>12. It was interesting. But I tried not to show my face so they wouldn't be able to recognise me from anywhere. That would have been awkward.</p>	<p><i>Boy, 15</i> No relationship, curiosity</p>
<p>14. They asked, and you just send because you don't want to be 'boring'.</p>	<p><i>Girl, 16</i> Unclear relationship, affirmation</p>

## Appendix 2. The focus groups' assessment

In the diagrams, we present how the children assessed the sending of nude images: within a romantic relationship (quotes 1 and 6) in Diagram 2; for sexual purposes with a short-term contact (quotes 4 and 9) in Diagram 3; and for affirmation from people that the children interpreted as unknown recipients (quotes 3 and 13) in Diagram 4.

The y-axis shows how many children placed the answers within a range, and the x-axis shows how acceptable the children considered a response to be. The further to the right a response lies, the more acceptable the child considered it to be to send images. The orange column represents the median point of the diagram.

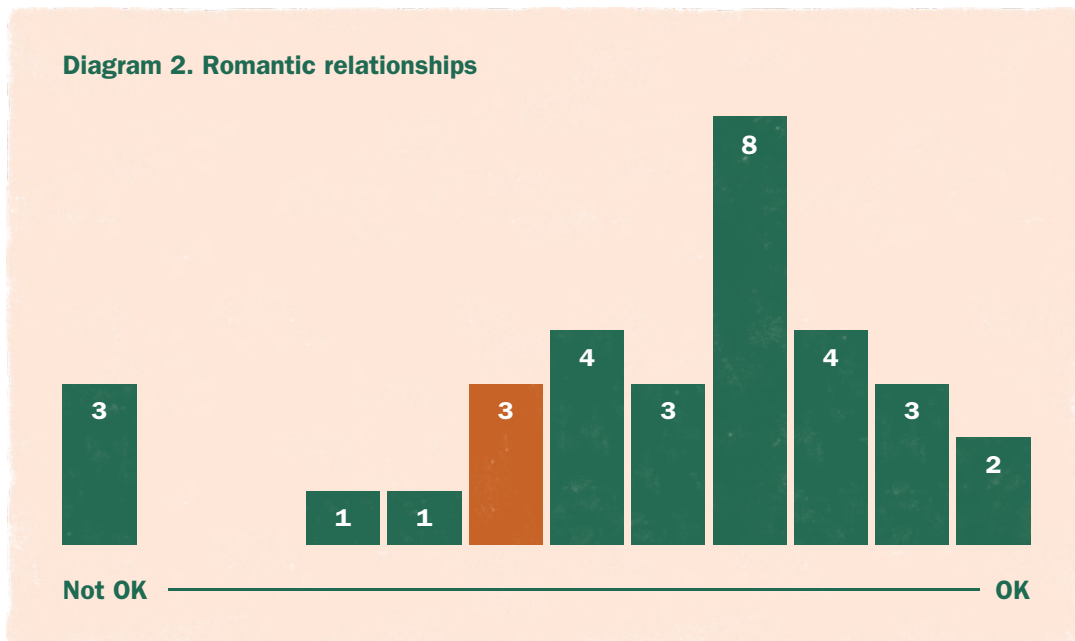




Diagram 3, Sex

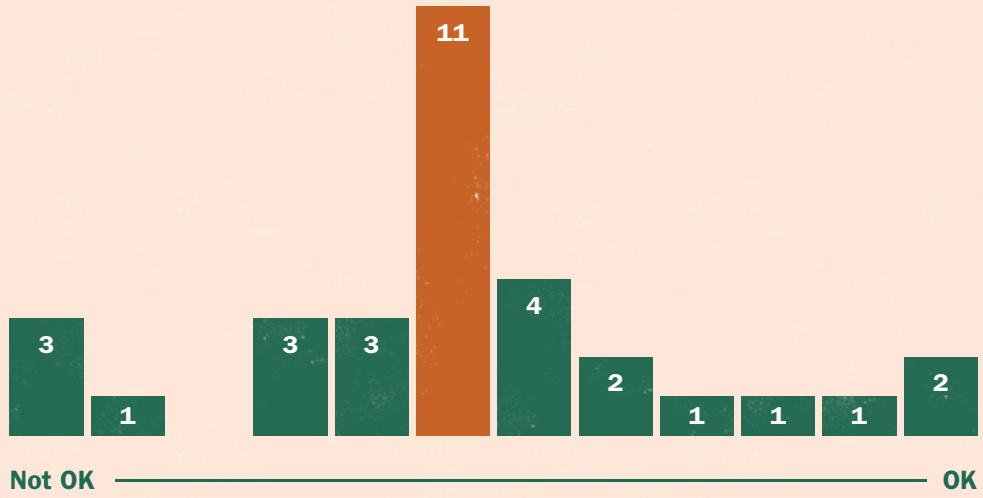
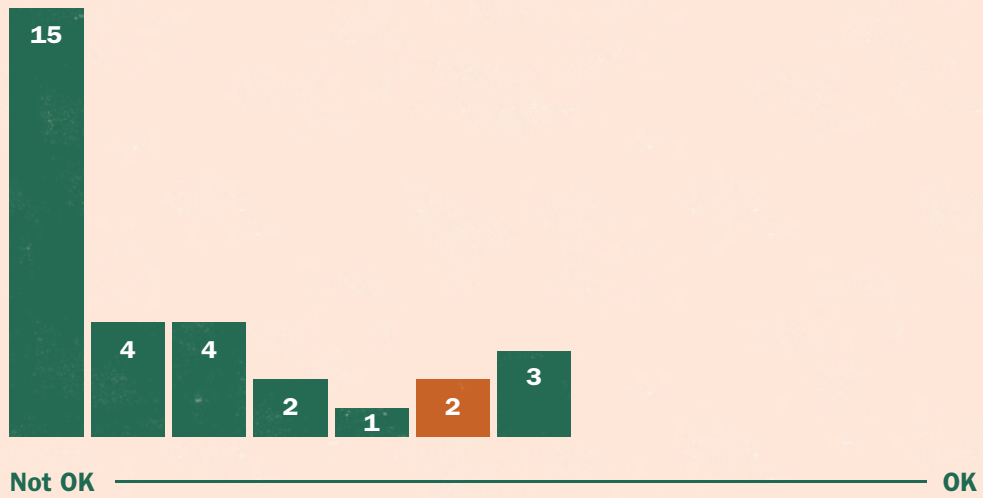


Diagram 4. Affirmation





'ECPAT Vuxenstöd' is a meeting place for parents and important adults who are close to children. Here, you can get support and guidance on issues that are related to sexual abuse and violation - online and offline.

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