

## Sexual Rights and Sexual Risks among Youth Online: A Review of Existing Knowledge Regarding Children and Young People's Developing Sexuality in Relation to New Media Environments

### Aims

This research was undertaken on behalf of the European NGO Alliance for Child Safety Online (eNACSO), a European Children's Rights NGO network working on children's and young people's safety online, funded by the European Commission. It set out to advance eNACSO's efforts to 'monitor emerging trends of the digital world in which children are fully-immersed and active participants' by gathering evidence from experts and stakeholders, as well as from varied database searches. It examined recent evidence relevant to sexual rights and sexual risk of harm in relation to children and young people, their developing sexuality and their use of new media, informing the design of focus groups to gather feedback on the results and recommendations from children and young people, and assessing the effectiveness and adequacy of existing measures to help children realise their rights and avoid being exposed to inappropriate risks.

### Key Findings

- The more adolescents engage in sexual activities online, the more they engage in them offline, and vice versa.
- Some indicators of offline vulnerability have been shown to have implications online. Those who are at greater risk of harmful online sexual experiences are youth who are part of a sexual minority, vulnerable due to past abuse or difficult family circumstances, or otherwise at risk due to disability, poverty, or other difficult personal circumstances.
- The child's age emerges as an important factor, with older teenagers more likely to access sexual content, engage with others and take other risks online.
- Across various ICT uses, girls and boys are faced with performing highly gendered roles. At the same time, it is evident from the literature that young people are learning gender performance from sexually explicit media, and feel pressure to conform to new pornographic norms.
- 'Sexting' can involve a lot of pressure and coercion for girls. That is, girls face much greater pressure to send 'sexts' and much harsher judgements when those images are shared beyond the intended recipient.
- Older youth and those with risk-taking or sensation-seeking behaviours are more likely to 'sext', but more information on demographics and other characteristics of youth who 'sext' are needed.
- Some studies report extremely small percentages of young people sharing sexual messages, while others report higher percentages, and many studies have used differing definitions; overall it is unclear how many youth are sharing sexual images.
- Girls are more likely to be sexually solicited online and find sexual solicitations disturbing, but they are also more likely to show sexual messages to an adult than boys who are also at risk.

- Online sources of information about sexual health are important to all youth, but especially low-income, LGBT and homeless youth.
- The source and credibility of information seems to matter to youth, but it is unclear which online sources they are using, how they judge credibility, and whether or not they see pornography as a credible source of information about sex.
- Many children and young people are exposed to or access pornography. While there are gender differences in viewing pornography, its impact and attitudes towards it, exposure to pornography generally impacts on youth's sexual attitudes, expectations and beliefs.
- Adolescents who view pornography and who are more frequent viewers experience an array of negative health and wellbeing outcomes, but the direction of the relationship between these factors is not clear.
- There is a tension between child protection and children's sexual and information rights.

### Policy Context

Policy makers should consider introduce comprehensive sex and relationship education early on in the school curricula and cover more than information about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. It should also look at issues like consent, dynamics of a healthy relationship, critical media analysis tools and critical analysis of pornography. In addition, policy makers should also offer more support to parents to enable them to provide advice to their children on issues related to sex, relationships and sexualisation in the media, and resources for talking to younger children in an age-appropriate manner. Most importantly, adolescents' voices and opinions need to be considered, and they should be invited to participate in boards and panels designing education programmes and policy.

### Methodology

The available research literature from a diverse group of stakeholders and experts in the subjects at hand, as well as varied database searches, was reviewed. Through 27 unique database searches we targeted literature relevant to 10- to 17-year-olds that addressed the following topics: general risks and opportunities with sexual experiences online, accessing sex education and sexual health information, access or exposure to pornography and sexually explicit content, 'sexting' or sharing self-generated explicit images, online grooming, trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Inclusion criteria included: research published in the last decade (2005-15), available in the English language, any research methodology, and studies focused on children aged 10 to 17. Ultimately 150 articles were critically reviewed and included in the findings. A number of additional texts were also read to frame, theorise and contextualise child and adolescent development.

Report available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64567/>

Sources eNACSO: [www.enacso.eu](http://www.enacso.eu) EU Kids Online: [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)

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