



Karolinska
Institutet

Online child sexual abuse and the difficulty in disclosing

Malin Joleby, PhD

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)

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

(WHO, 1999, p. 15)

Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA)

"involves the use of information and communication technology as a means to sexually abuse children"

(Greijer & Dock, 2016)

Can be conducted partly or completely through digital means

(Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020)

Online Child Sexual Abuse

- Unwanted sexual attention
- Sexual communication
- Grooming with the intent to meet offline
- Sending or receiving sexual images
- Live sexual activity in webcam
- Forcing children to engage in sexual activity (sextortion)
- Live-streamed child sexual exploitation
- Organizing sex-trafficking of children
- Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)
- AI-generated CSAM

OCSA on the rise

- Drastic increase in police reports, reaching record highs.
- **Sweden**: ten-fold increase of online sexual exploitation during the course of 10 years (World Childhood Foundation, 2022)
- **Finland**: 60% of sexual crimes against children was conducted partly or completely online (Hietajärvi, 2023)
- **US**: CSAM is "one of the fastest growing illicit industries in the United States" (Cullen et al., 2020)
- **NECMEC**: 36 million reports of CSAM in 2023

Similar consequences

- Potential severe psychological consequences (e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harming, suicidal behaviour, disgust, hostility, trust deficits, panic attacks, impaired relationships)

(Chauvire-Geib & Fegert, 2023; Stänicke et al., 2024)

- Emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes appear to be similar for online and offline abuse

(Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020, 2021; Jonsson et al., 2019)

Disclosing child sexual abuse

- Many children delay disclosing, often until adulthood, or never disclose (e.g. Alaggia, et al., 2019)
- If they disclose, it is to a peer (Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021)

What about Online CSA?

- Often comes to light through police investigations (Katz et al., 2021)

52 police cases of OCSA disclosed through:

- 31 police
- 13 family member
- 5 peer
- 3 child

Twenty children initially refused to disclose, reluctant to collaborate or denied/concealed parts, even when confronted with evidence

Why is it difficult to disclose?

Shame and self-blame

- The child's active participation in the acts (Schmidt et al., 2023)
- Felt they had done something wrong (Joleby et al., 2020)

"It has led me to think that I have not been subjected to anything, but it is like I have subjected myself to it."

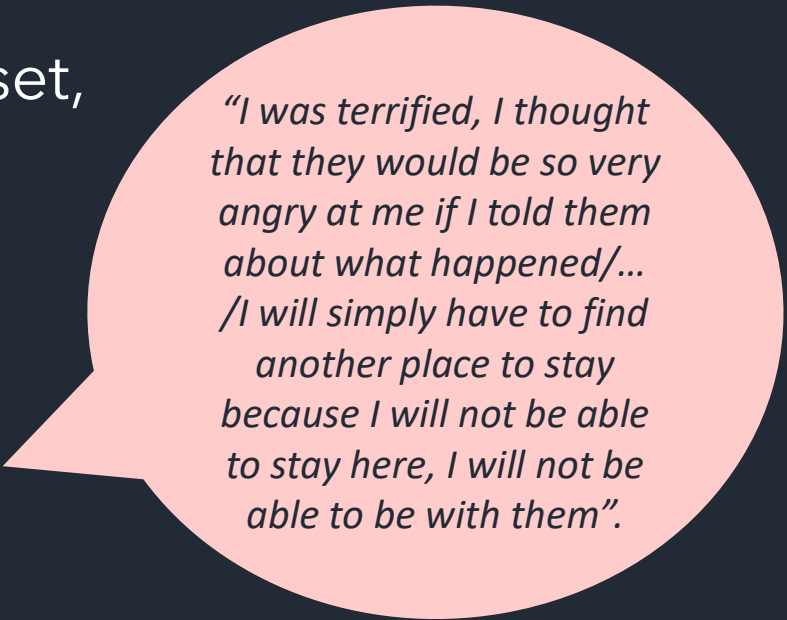
"I thought it was my fault and that I had done something criminal"

"I was probably afraid that people would think it was my fault, or that, that people would think badly of me for it. Or look at me and think that 'oh she's to blame for starting to talk to him, it's her fault'."

(Joleby et al., 2020)

Fear

- that the perpetrator would become angry and disseminate intimate images, videos, or conversations
- that their parents would become upset, that they would lose access to their phone (Gemara et al., 2022)

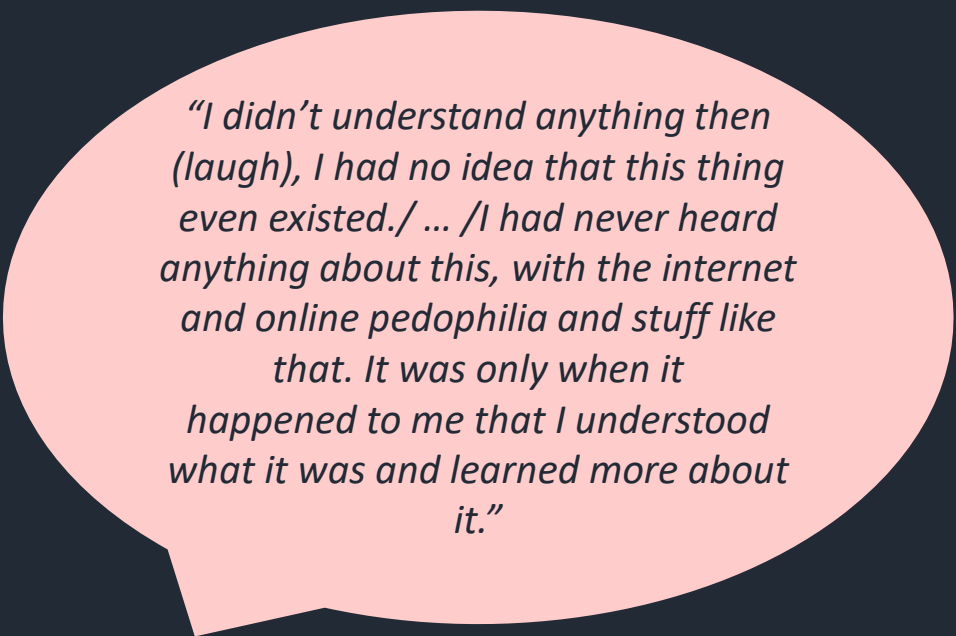


"I was terrified, I thought that they would be so very angry at me if I told them about what happened/... /I will simply have to find another place to stay because I will not be able to stay here, I will not be able to be with them".

(Joleby et al., 2024)

Non-stereotypical

- Didn't recognize it as abuse
- Did not expect anyone else to understand (Joleby et al., 2024; Schmidt et al., 2023)



"I didn't understand anything then (laugh), I had no idea that this thing even existed./ ... /I had never heard anything about this, with the internet and online pedophilia and stuff like that. It was only when it happened to me that I understood what it was and learned more about it."

(Joleby et al., 2024)

How they fell victim

Perpetrators

- are skilled at manipulating their victims
- can deceive by fabricating identities

Young people

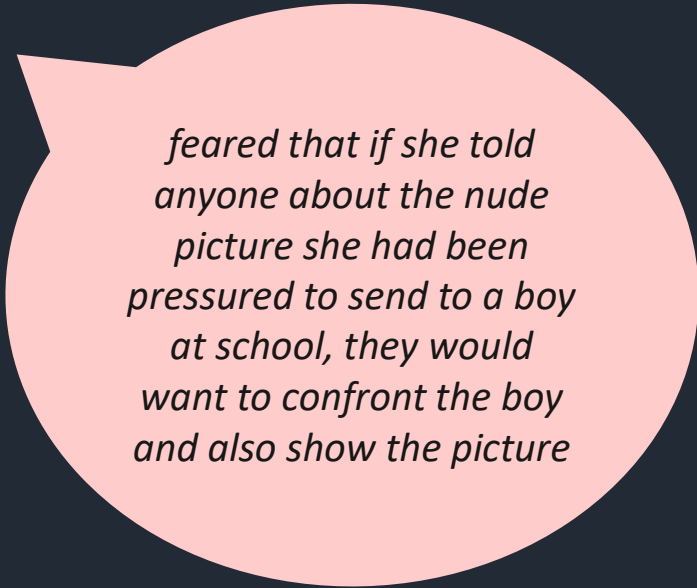
- are naturally sexually curious
 - may perceive online sexual contact as a safer introduction to sexual activity (Anastassiou, 2017)
 - are used to communicating digitally, also for sexual purposes (1 in 5 youth sending sexts) (Mori et al., 2022)
 - do not expect adults to understand their digital world or sexual curiosity (Gemara et al., 2023)
-
- do not understand
 - wanting to protect
 - ashamed

Naivety and youth

- 1 in 10 aged 7-9 years (Joleby et al., 2021)
- Nearly half of self-generated images depict pre-pubescent children (ECPAT, 2020)
- less cognitively developed and have less sexual knowledge = more vulnerable
- Incited to engage in acts they don't understand (ECPAT, 2020)

Documentation

- Silencing victims
 - perpetrator threatens to disseminate
 - Intensifying social shame (Stänicke et al., 2024)



feared that if she told anyone about the nude picture she had been pressured to send to a boy at school, they would want to confront the boy and also show the picture

! Reporting to the police means that someone will view the images

How to facilitate disclosure

Desire to talk to someone!
How to lower the barriers?

- Openly and non-judgmentally address OCSA
(Stänicke et al., 2024)

- Facilitating factors (Joleby et al., 2024)

- Open dialogue on sensitive topics
- Providing an opportunity to tell
- Allowing the child to be in control of the story
- Lifting the shame and self-blame

"I think I wanted to tell my parents, I think I wanted to all along./.../Because I really...didn't want to be alone with it."

"When it was at its worst, I probably felt that now I would have liked to talk to my mom or dad about it. Because what should I do? /... /When it became very aggressive, I would have liked to have seen an adult stepping in and taking over."

(Joleby et al., 2024)

Thank you!

malin.joleby@ki.se