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# Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse

## Interviews with affected young people



# ROBERT

Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse:  
**Interviews with affected young people**

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However, what we hope the reader of this report will hear are the voices of these young people to whom this report is dedicated.

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## Introduction

### Children and sexuality online

Most young people in Europe have access to the Internet. In a study by Livingstone et al. (2011), including 25 142 children between 9-16 years old in 25 countries in the European Union (EU), the average age for first time contact with the Internet was 9 years old. In this study 60% reported that they used the Internet on a daily basis and 33% that they used the Internet once or twice a week. Access to the Internet is not only increasing, but today many youth have their own mobile phones with internet access. In the study by Livingstone et al. (2011) 35% of the youth used their own PC, 24% their own laptop and 12% a handheld device (e.g. iPod Touch, I-phone and Blackberry) when going online. The most common activities online were doing schoolwork (85%) followed by online gaming (83%) and watching video clips (76%). Most young people are alone when using their mobile phone and the Internet (Medierådet, 2010). This differs from other media forms, e.g. watching television and playing games on the computer, that more often are done together with a friend or an adult. This means that young people most of the time are alone when surfing the net, without adults being able to supervise or to hinder the youth from possible risk taking online. Most young people seem though to be well aware of the fact that there are safe and risky behaviours connected with the use of Internet (Jonsson et al, 2009).

When a child reaches adolescence it is developmentally normal to expand their social network, forming close relationships and experiencing sexuality. The Internet is accessible, anonymous and affordable (Cooper, 1998) which makes it natural to use it for sexual purposes. In a study by Daneback and Månsson (2009) nine out of ten Swedish young people, between 18-25 years old, used the Internet for romantic or sexual purposes. The most common online sexual activity was watching pornography among the boys and searching for information about sex among the girls. Many studies have shown that pornography use is greater for young males (Caroll et al, 2008; Luder et al., 2011; Svedin et al, 2011) but recent studies show that the gender differences are most apparent with older adolescents and that there are less differences between genders who are 12 years old and younger (Livingstone et al., 2011). However young people are not only passive consumers of sexual material. They also produce and distribute their own sexual material and find sexual contacts online.

### **Online risk taking behaviour**

Offline risk taking behaviour such as use of drugs, smoking, not attending school and having unprotected sex are more common among adolescents than others (e.g. Benthin et al., 1993; Boyer, 2006; Steinberg, 2008). Studies indicate that young people who take risks offline also do so online (Mitchell et al, 2007a). However, different studies use varying definitions as to what online risk taking behaviour is. Baumgartner et al. (2010) limited their definition to include communication with unknown people and categorized the following behaviours as risky:

- Searching online for someone to talk about sex
- Searching online for someone to have sex
- Sending intimate photos or videos to someone online
- Disclosing personal information like telephone numbers and addresses to someone online.

Most risk behaviour does not lead to any negative consequences and is more likely to be associated with positive outcomes, while other risk behaviours can result in abuse, be life- altering or may, in extreme cases, even be a threat to life. Online risk taking behaviour has been shown to increase the likelihood of negative experiences, such as unwanted aggressive sexual solicitations online (Cooper et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2007b). Misuse of personal information by others is another negative consequence.

Even if young people are well informed about the negative effects of, for example, taking drugs or having unprotected sex, some still go ahead. Likewise research studies, and results from clinical projects about online sexual abuse, have shown that young people often are well aware of the risks online but take them anyway (e.g. Jonsson et al., 2009; Wolak, 2007). This research addresses some of the major challenges in constructing preventative work to hinder young people from risk taking behaviours (see, for example, Denehy, 2000).

There might be many explanations as to why young people take risks online. In the study by Baumgartner et al. (2010) young people's engagement in online risky sexual behaviour was investigated in a cross-sectional study. The young people who took sexual risks online perceived that more friends were engaged in these behaviours, perceived fewer risks and more benefits from the risky sexual behaviour and felt personally less vulnerable to negative consequences than other young people. Probably most youth who take risks online estimate the risks to be less than the positive effects that might follow. Studies from clinical projects and research have shown that one primary function of online risk taking behaviour is to be seen and to receive affirmation (Jonsson et al., 2009; Jonsson & Svedin, 2012; Nigård, 2009).

## Sexual exposure online

There are numerous images and films online showing young people in sexual situations. The images stretch from pictures of youth posing scantily dressed to images where the young person is having sex alone or together with someone. The context to the sexual material may vary. Some might be produced spontaneously by the young person, and some might not. Likewise the dissemination of the images can be with or without consent. Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) studied 550 criminal cases of youth-produced sexual images and found two major categories of material: aggravated and experimental. The aggravated material involved criminal or abusive elements and the experimental involved youth who took pictures of themselves, for example, to establish a relationship with a boy or a girlfriend or for sexual attention seeking. Self-generated sexual material online is often referred to as sexting (e.g. Cox Communication, 2009; Dowdell et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2012; Lenhart, 2009).

Different definitions are used, but creating, sharing, forwarding and sometimes also receiving suggestive nude or nearly nude photos through text message or e-mail are often referred to as sexting or self-generated content. The fact that different studies use different definitions and methods makes it hard to estimate how common the phenomenon is among young people, but it varies between 3% (Livingstone, 2011) to 20% (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). In a study by Lenhart (2009) focus groups were conducted to outline possible situations in which sexually suggestive images could be shared and forwarded. Three general scenarios emerged: (i) exchange of images solely between romantic partners, (ii) exchanges between partners that were shared with others outside the relationship and (iii) exchange between people who were not yet in a relationship. In a Swedish nationwide survey (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2009) 9.4% of the girls and 6.3% of the boys (age 16-25) reported they had posted sexual pictures/videos of themselves online. Approximately 2% had had experiences of sexy pic-

tures/films being disseminated against their will. In the group of youth (16-25 years old) who had posted sexual pictures/videos it was more common to have had sex for compensation, bought sex or being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) These youths had also to a greater extent been threatened with and exposed to physical violence.

## Online sexual requests

Young people are approached with sexual suggestions both online and via mobile phone by peers and adults. In the EU kids online survey, 15% of 11-16 year olds had received peer-to-peer sexual messages or images (Livingstone et al., 2011). In a Swedish study (Brå, 2007) 30% (48% girls and 18% boys) out of the 7500 young persons (14-15 years old) responded that they had had contact with sexual content through the Internet during the last year. In another Swedish study (Medierådet, 2010) 21% of the 12-16 year old children responded that someone had talked about sex with them over the Internet. Somewhat more than one third of these conversations were with strangers. Mitchell et al. (2007a) studied risk factors for receiving sexual requests online and identified these as: being female, being of black ethnicity, having a close online relationship, engaging in sexual behaviour online and having had experiences of physical and sexual abuse offline. In the Swedish study by Brå (2007) the youth who had been sexually approached by adults online had lower satisfaction with school and family relations, and were more often subjected to bullying, thefts and violence. They also spent more time with older friends, had been drunk more often and had a greater rate of truancy.

Most young people that are approached with sexual suggestions online do not respond or block the person making the approach (Brå, 2007). For some, the approach leads to a contact online or offline. The behaviour of the young people themselves can vary on a scale from being innocent, curious and surprised to being more active and responsive (Sve-

din, 2011). Possibly the anonymity and the feeling of being safe when sitting at home in front of the screen makes the young person test the limits of what is possible more than they would have done in a similar situation offline (Brå, 2007; Jonsson et al, 2009). Even if it is possible to experiment with one's true identity online, studies have shown that this is more applicable with younger than older adolescents who tend to reveal more of their true identity online (Valkenburg et al., 2005).

For the many young people it can be an exciting and pleasurable experience to have an online relationship. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) mentioned four positive aspects of developing online relationships that in some cases become sexual: (i) they facilitate the formation of romantic relationships (ii) they improve the chances of finding an optimal partner (iii) they develop relationships on attachments, not simple physical appearance, and (iv) they improve one's skill in interpersonal communication. On the other hand there can be problems with online relationships and sex. The problems might be magnified for young people who do not have the knowledge, experience and maturity to assess what is manageable and what is getting out of hand with regard to their personal lives (Freeman- Longo, 2000).

In some cases the online contact leads also to an offline contact. In a Norwegian study (Suseg et al., 2009) 35% of the boys and 26% of the girls stated they had met someone face to face who initially was an online contact. Less than five per cent of these meetings had led to sexual harassment or abuse. Wolak et al. (2004) interviewed law enforcement investigators who had been involved in 129 sexual offences against juvenile victims (between 13 and 15 years of age) who had met an adult offender in Internet chat rooms. Most victims met and had sex with the adult on more than one occasion. Many of the victims were involved with, or felt a close bond with, the offender. The contact online can be of great importance for the young person who, in many cases, seems to like the perpetrator. The young person can be groomed or lured into a

sexual relationship. A famous Swedish court case is the "Alexandra case" where 58 young girls were lured into a sexual relationship with a man. The girls described how the man, who posed as a woman, gave compliments and offered money and model contacts in exchange for sexual images. The online contacts resulted in meetings offline where the girls were sexually abused (Wagner, 2008).

### **Young persons at greater risk of becoming victims of online sexual abuse**

There is a lack of studies describing the young persons that are at greater risk of becoming victims of online sexual abuse. From existing studies it seems that older youth are more frequently victimised. This can be explained by the fact that they use the Internet to a greater extent, are more curious about sexuality and to a greater extent show what is generally taken as risk taking behaviour (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Livingstone et al., 2011). Girls also seem to be more at risk (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2007a; Wells & Mitchell, 2008; Wolak et al., 2008) as well as youth who identify themselves as homosexual or with unclear sexual orientation (Wolak et al., 2004). Frequent use of the Internet and high risk-taking behaviour online are also factors in the US studies: (Mitchell et al., 2010; Wolak et al., 2008; Ybarra et al., 2004).

It seems that vulnerable youth are at greater risk of victimisation and life adversity offline but also online (Wells & Mitchell, 2008). Youth with symptoms of depression (Ybarra et al., 2004) and youth with a history of physical or sexual abuse are also at greater risk of becoming victims of online sexual abuse (Mitchell et al., 2007b; Noll et al., 2009). There are also some environmental risk factors including youth who have conflicts with their parents (Sorensen, 2007) and youth living with single-parents or reconstituted families are more at risk of online sexual solicitation (Gallagher, 2007, Mitchell et al., 2007b; Mitchell et al., 2010). Being at risk is not equal to coming to harm. Most studies have looked at young

people receiving solicitations and requests for sexual images or sexual contact.

The EU Safer Internet Project (ROBERT) (Ainsaar & Lööf, 2011) outlines a range of individual and environmental risk factors associated with children and young people becoming victims of internet-related sexual abuse but it is clear that these factors are complex and intertwined. The project identifies online risk-taking behaviour as the most important and most studied of these risk factors. In the review of the literature provided by the project, Soo and Bodanovskaya (2011) concluded that, 'It is apparent that the more young people are open to online sexual activities (especially flirting and having sexual conversations with strangers), the more probable it is that they may become victims of sexual harassment, solicitation or grooming' (p. 49). However, Munro (2011) has concluded that currently available research provides 'at best a partial and somewhat US-centric picture of who may be particularly vulnerable to specific contact and content risks' (p 13). It is apparent that research to date has used a variety of methodologies in order to make sense of online solicitation and grooming activities. Many of these have used survey-type data with children and young people (which relies on the individuals to be open and honest about their experiences), interviews and official records data with offenders, and ethnographic work with police officers. Few studies have used interviews with young people, outside of the original work by Svedin and Back (1997; 2003) in the context of illegal images of children. The following analysis reflects a bid to listen to the views of young people who have been sexually groomed online to gain an understanding of the process of being groomed and the factors that influenced both disclosure and their ability to move on.

## Method

A qualitative design was adopted in order to meet the aim of the study, which was to explore the experiences of young people who have been involved in online grooming. Qualitative research has been defined as: *"an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting"* (Creswell, 1998 p.15). Although there has been a lot of qualitative research in relation to childhood sexual abuse (CSA) (e.g. Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt & Tjersland, 2005; McElvaney, Greene & Hogan, 2012), there has been no research identified concerning the experiences of children whose abuse has been mediated by technology.

There are a number of qualitative research approaches available to the researcher. In this instance, grounded theory methods were chosen as they have been used in related research with young people or with survivors of sexual abuse (e.g. Jensen et al., 2005; McElvaney et al., 2012; Draucker & Martsolf, 2008). Grounded theory methods are used to identify psychosocial processes, human experiences that involve change over time and are influenced by both internal psychological factors and social interactions (Benoliel, 1996). Grounded theory is the most commonly used qualitative research approach by researchers across a variety of disciplines (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). It was developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s who defined grounded theory as; *"the discovery of theory from data which fits empirical situations and is understandable to sociologists and layman alike and most important, it works - provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications"* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 1).

Grounded theory's logical and systematic approach comes from Glaser's background in quantitative researcher whereas Strauss was influenced by symbolic interaction which is reflected in grounded theory's focus on process, meaning and action (Charmaz, 2006). In grounded theory, researchers start with a general research aim or question and gradually develop a theory through analysing the research findings (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is inductive in that the theory develops after data collection commences however it is also deductive in terms of analysing data and then deciding where or who to sample next (Glaser, 1978). Glaser and Strauss (1967) highlight the importance of the underlying process involved in developing theory which is the simultaneous collection, coding and analysis of data. They advise that researchers should engage in all three tasks together as often as they can. Glaser and Strauss (1967) use the term, theoretical sampling to describe this process and define it as: *"the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges"* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.45). Researchers stop collecting data when they have reached the point of saturation. This means that nothing new is coming out of the data and where gathering more data would probably not develop the theory or explanation much further (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) also state that in reality, saturation often occurs when researchers have limits on their time or financial resources.

Researchers have a number of grounded theory methods to choose from (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006) however all types of grounded theory provide useful guidelines for the collection and analysis of data (Charmaz, 2006). For the present research we decided to use Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, as she does not assume that theories emerge from the

data distinct from the researcher and instead proposes that they are a construction of reality between the participant and researcher; *"...we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices"* (p. 10).

### **Ethical considerations**

The main ethical issues in the present study related to protecting the identities of participants because of the secrecy that is often associated with child sexual abuse. It was important to be mindful that participants may have decided to limit disclosure of their behaviour and that of the person who engaged them in online grooming, and that confidentiality should be respected throughout the duration of the study. We were also clear in the information provided to young people that should a new disclosure be made of sexual abuse then this would have to be reported to child protection agencies.

### **Anonymity**

In order to ensure anonymity, code numbers (e.g. S1) were used instead of participants' names on the interview transcriptions. Participants were informed verbally that direct quotes would be used in the written report of the research to illustrate theoretical categories, however any personally identifiable information (names of people, places, dates etc.) would be altered or removed.

### **Confidentiality**

A number of steps were taken to ensure confidentiality. The research interviews were translated, back-translated to ensure accuracy, and transcribed and the recordings were deleted once transcriptions were com-

plete. The anonymised transcripts were stored on a secure web-based platform to which only those directly involved in the research process had access. Consent forms were kept by each of the organisations who facilitated the research.

### **Informed consent**

The participant information sheet highlighted that participation was voluntary; participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason, and that there was no impact on care regardless of whether an individual decides to participate or not. At the beginning of each research interview participants were reminded of the aim of the study, what participation would involve and their rights were explained. Participants were also given the chance to ask questions relating to the research and their involvement in the study. Once participants indicated they were willing to take part in the research they were asked to sign the consent form. Participants were also requested to provide consent for their interview to be recorded.

### **Support for participants**

Given the sensitive nature of the research it was possible that some participants could become upset during the interview perhaps due to talking about issues relating to what had happened with respect to the abusive contact. If this happened the interview would stop and the person would be asked if they would like a break and whether they would like to continue. If there were concerns about the young person's emotional state either during or after a research interview then support would be offered. All of the interviews were conducted by therapists and child protection professionals.

### **Ethical approval**

An application for ethical approval was submitted to the Research Ethics Committees at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, and Linköping University, Sweden. It was acknowledged by the research Consortium that there are important ethical considerations in conducting research with children, particularly in relation to problematic or distressing experiences. In preparing this research submission, reference was made to guidelines offered by Researching Children's Experiences Online across Countries: Issues and Problems in Methodology (Lobe, Livingstone & Haddon, 2007). They note that, "the following central issues are identified by a number of ethics committees: respect for persons (as the fundamental value for all the rest), privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity/pseudonymity, risk/benefits for participants, risk/benefits for social good, public versus private space, subject compensation, justice, cross-cultural issues, special/vulnerable populations, deception, nondisclosure, conflict of interest and research misconduct". We also consulted the guidelines used by Lexicon (Plotnikoff & Woolfson, 2007) with regard to their study 'Evaluating policy commitments to young witnesses: a national survey'. We considered the following issues important to address:

Obtaining informed consent:

- It was essential that the young person and their parent/ carer had a clear understanding of the purpose of the interview and collecting their data and how it would be used.
- A decision was made to use 'opt-in' consent after both children, and where appropriate carers, have been supplied with information about the research and have been given time to consider whether they wish to be involved. This information not only informs and invites participation but explains the need for their consent to disclose some types of information to the research team.

- The young person and the carer was informed that they can withdraw from the research project at any time and their interview material would be excluded from the analysis.
- A copy of the consent form as be left with the young person and their carer.

Safeguarding the rights and welfare of young people:

- In addition to obtaining and confirming the consent of participants throughout the period prior to interview and during the interview itself, other steps were taken to safeguard the rights and welfare of young interviewees. All interviewers have a relevant professional background within each country and were experienced in interviewing young people.
- Each professional adhered to the child protection policies of their own organisations.

Recording, reporting, storage and access to the research data and results.

- Interviewers' forms from interviews with young people and their parents/carers identified the interviewee by code number, not by name. Encrypted data was placed on a password protected platform and accessed only by the immediate research team. Any non-electronic data was stored under lock and key by each country-specific organization.
- Privacy was to be protected: no individual was identified, either directly (by name) or indirectly in the analysis of the data presented in the study report.
- All quoted extracts were anonymised and combined with other data.

Welfare of researchers:

- When conducting research on sensitive and distressing subject matter, it is an ethical requirement to take account of the psychological welfare of researchers. All members of the research team had received child protection training and were experienced in interviewing children who have experienced significant harm. Nevertheless, it was important to offer support and debriefing. Guidance for interviewers emphasised that they should contact the lead researcher for debriefing if they were distressed following an interview or had concerns of any kind.
- Physical safety of interviewers is equally important. Some interviews were conducted in the home of the interviewees although most interviews were made in a clinical setting. All interviewers had previous experience in conducting interviews with young people in their homes in the course of their professional work. They followed standard written procedures in arranging interviews. Interviewers carried mobile phones and were instructed that if, at any time, they had concerns about their personal safety then they should not enter the home or leave immediately if a concern arose during the interview.

## Procedure

The inclusion criteria for the study were:

1. Young people of both genders aged between 12-18 years who had been identified as subjected to:
  - Online contact leading to sexual abuse offline
  - Offline sexual abuse leading to online distribution of images
  - Online contact leading to online sexual abuse without physical contact
2. Are currently, or within the last two years, engaged in a helping or therapeutic relationship.

## **Participant recruitment**

In each participating country for this work package (Sweden, UK, Germany, Italy, Denmark and Russia) professionals had been identified who were currently engaged in therapeutic or support work with children who had been subject to technology mediated sexual exploitation or abuse and who had agreed to participate in the project. These individuals were asked to identify suitable young people from their case load who they felt may be interested in being part of this research project. Where appropriate (according to ethical practice within each country and with respect to the age of the young person) contact was made with the young person's parents or carer. The purpose of the study was explained to the young person, and where appropriate, their parents or carer, and an information sheet was given to them to read, with the agreement that one-week later they would be contacted by the same person and asked if they wished to take part in the study.

If the young person (and where appropriate their parent/carer) agreed to participate, they were asked to sign a consent form and a time agreed for further questions and to arrange an interview at a place the young person felt comfortable with (this might be home or a clinic). The interview followed the guide and lasted for approximately one hour, but remained flexible enough to allow the young person to explore issues that they felt were important to them. It was digitally recorded for later analysis.

The interviews were allocated a unique code and, in the case of non-English interviews, translated into English by the research organisation, back-translated within each country and transcribed. Each coded transcription removed any information that might be used to identify the young person, their family or others involved in the abusive situation. These coded records were encrypted and stored on a password protect-

ed shared drive hosted by the Council of the Baltic Sea States in Sweden. The interview data were analysed using Grounded Theory Methods by three members of the research consortium. Again, all coded electronic data remained as encrypted files and stored on a password-protected laptop. The encrypted data and analysis will be stored for five years after which it will be destroyed. The recruitment period lasted for approximately 12 months interwoven with data collection and analysis.

## **Characteristics of the participants**

Twenty-seven young people were recruited for the study. The age at the time of the sexual assault following online grooming was between 11 to 17 years and approximately 82% of the respondents were female. At the time of the sexual assault all but a few of the respondents lived with their biological parents with a majority living with both their mother and their father.

All suffered severe sexual abuse offline as a result of online communication. The sexual abuse involved penetrative sexual abuse, vaginal, anal and/or oral, except in three cases where the form of abuse is unclear.

## **Data generation**

In a grounded theory study, data can be generated from many different sources such as observations, individual and group interviews, the literature, television programs, diaries and other first-hand accounts (Schreiber & Stern, 2001). The research question or aim can influence the methods of data collection a researcher selects (Charmaz, 2008). Given the sensitive nature of the research topic it was decided that interviews would be the most appropriate and informative method of data collection.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

The interviews were semi-structured using an interview guide with suggested prompts. The sample questions for use within the present study were not referred to routinely with each participant but instead acted as a guide, and a flexible approach was adopted. At the end of each research interview the researcher made attempts to finish on a positive note, participants were asked if they had anything else they wished to include in the interview, and they were thanked for taking part in the research project. Participants were reminded that support was available for them if they should need it.

### **Data analysis**

The findings were analysed manually following the coding procedures of Charmaz (2008). Coding is described as: “*the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means*” (Charmaz, 2008, p.46). There were two main parts to the coding process: initial coding which requires the researcher to name lines of data or incidents in the data, followed by focused coding which involves taking the most important or common initial codes and using them to organise and build relationships with large volumes of data (Charmaz, 2008).

In grounded theory, analysis is conducted throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method is central to this endeavour, and involves searching for incidences of similar phenomena within interviews and between participants. This allows for consideration of similarities and differences in how participants describe their experiences (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Initial coding**

Initial coding is the first stage of the analytic process. Charmaz (2006) suggests that initial codes should be considered as provisional, and should help the researcher to discover pertinent issues which may be worthy of further exploration in subsequent interviews. Line-by-line coding was used in the current study in order to facilitate picking up the subtle nuances of the data. A line was taken to be a unit of meaning, either a sentence or phrase. Charmaz (2006) recommends developing codes which stick closely to the data and reflect action. In this respect, initial codes began with a verb and reflected the action described by the participant in each line of speech. In order to complete the initial coding of interviews, transcripts were printed off with a wide margin on the left hand side in which initial codes were manually written.

### **Focused coding**

Charmaz (2006) describes focused coding as the second major phase in coding. Codes at this stage are more conceptual than initial codes, and allow larger segments of data to be synthesised. In this phase, the most significant or frequent codes from the initial coding phase can be used to sift through large amounts of data. It is necessary at this stage to decide which codes have the most analytic value in categorising the data. Focused codes are developed by comparing data and considering how data fits with existent codes. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) have suggested the use of axial coding – the process of asking particular questions of the data – to map data along dimensions at this stage. However, following Glaser (1992), it was felt that this might force the complex meanings into a particular type of structure, which seemed inconsistent with a social constructionist approach. Therefore, this procedure was not used.

## Theoretical coding

In contrast to a positivist stance where theory seeks to explain causality, Charmaz (2006) presents a method for constructing grounded theories which seek to understand the phenomena of interest through a process of interpretation. She states that: *“This type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as inextricably linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual”* (p.127). As suggested by the name, theory should be grounded in the data, and should seek to contextualise participants’ experiences in light of broader social structures. Charmaz (2006) argues that: *“A contextualized grounded theory can start with sensitizing concepts that address such concepts as power, global reach, and difference and end with inductive analyses that theorize connections between local worlds and larger social structures”* (p.133).

The final stage of analysis, which allows for the development of a grounded theory, is theoretical coding. Glaser (1978) describes how codes begin to cluster together into ‘coding families’ of related concepts at this stage. Charmaz (2006) describes this stage of analysis as a sophisticated level of coding, where relationships between categories are weaved together through the process of constant comparison. The categories that are most meaningful, prominent, and have the greatest degree of explanatory power are raised to the level of theoretical concepts. Theoretical codes integrate categories and specify the relationships between them. For instance, they may highlight the context and conditions in which phenomena are evident, and how categories interact with each other. The emergent theory should provide a parsimonious integration of concepts which allows for a coherent understanding of the relationships between categories (Charmaz, 2006).

## Memos

Throughout the analytic process, detailed memos were produced documenting thoughts about the data as they occurred. Peters and Wester (2005) emphasised the importance of memo writing as a process which forces the researcher to reflect and to explicate their analytic ideas and decisions. Further, Charmaz (2006) highlights that memos aid the development of conceptual categories with broad explanatory power by allowing comparisons and connections in the data to be noted, reflected upon and developed.

## Theoretical sufficiency

Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe theoretical saturation as the point at which new properties of a category cease to arise. However, it could be argued that the concept of theoretical saturation has an air of finality about it. This appears to conflict with Glaser’s (1978) notion that theories should always be modifiable in the light of new information. A useful alternative definition is provided by Morse (1995), who views theoretical saturation as the point at which researchers have enough data to build a comprehensive and convincing theory. She suggests that saturation will be most easily achieved if theoretical sampling is used to select a culturally cohesive sample that shares the characteristics defined by the research topic. In a similar vein, Dey (1999) has proposed the concept of theoretical sufficiency as an alternative to saturation, which refers the point at which the researcher has developed categories suggested by the data with adequate explanatory power.

## Validity

As qualitative research is relatively new to psychology, it is important for qualitative researchers to demonstrate rigour in their research and produce findings that are on a par with quantitative research in terms of

their usefulness (Yardley and Moss-Morris, 2009). Yardley (2000) developed a set of principles which qualitative researchers can use to ensure quality in their research; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency and impact and importance. Yardley (2000) states that the principles should not be perceived as rules that have to be obeyed and they can be interpreted flexibly which is in keeping with qualitative research methodologies. Despite this it is still important that researchers provide justification for any deviation from standards for good research practice (Yardley & Moss-Morris, 2009). The validity criteria of Yardley (2000) were referred to in the present study as follows:

### **Sensitivity to context**

Sensitivity to context involves the researcher being aware of the importance of the context of theory, the socio-cultural context of the research setting, and the context of the relationship between the researcher and participants (Yardley, 2000). In relation to the present study, sensitivity to the context of theory was demonstrated through the fact that the first product of the research consortium was a systematic gathering of related research literature across Europe, North America and Russia. In addition, qualitative research studies in similar research areas were examined, for example in relation to grooming behaviour by offenders from the EU Online Grooming Project<sup>1</sup>.

### **Commitment and rigour**

Yardley (2000) defines commitment as: *“prolonged engagement with the topic (not necessarily just as a researcher, but also in the capacity of sufferer, carer etc) the development of competence and skill in the methods used,*

*and immersion in the relevant data (whether theoretical or empirical)”* (p.221). The analysis was carried out by three of the project consortium. The Swedish interviews were analysed by the Swedish researcher as well as the two other researchers. A further sample of interviews (approximately 18 in total) were analysed by researcher two, and researcher three analysed all of the interviews. At all times, there was discussion about the process of coding and meetings took place regularly to discuss the coding and refine the emergent categories. Two of the researchers had had previous experience of using qualitative research methods and had attended workshops and training on grounded theory. The categories and their labels were discussed at a theoretical level and with constant comparison to the existing literature to allow for the development of a tentative model.

In terms of rigour, which Yardley (2000) defines as; *“the resulting completeness of data collection and analysis”* (p.221), this was achieved by triangulation of data whereby data was collected from participant interviews, detailed discussions took place between the interviewers, and the literature was consulted in order to compare the study findings with previous theories or models in the area. Although the participants in the study could be described as a hard to reach population due to the relative scarcity of young people who had been groomed online and who were available for interview, variation in the sample was still achieved. For example we sampled in relation to age, gender, sexual orientation, and other problematic engagement with the Internet and sexual behaviours. The analysis procedures described earlier enabled the researchers to engage in-depth with the data and develop a theory that was grounded in the experiences of the participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Available from <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/study/european-online-grooming-project>.

## Coherence and transparency

In order for a study to have coherence then it must be clear how the research aim fits with the research method and furthermore it is important to have adequate knowledge about qualitative research methods in order to select the most appropriate method for the study (Yardley, 2000). It has been justified earlier in this report why qualitative research and constructivist grounded theory in particular were chosen to meet the aim of this study.

Transparency is about the researcher being open and honest in relation to how the study was carried out so that other people can have a clear idea of the methods involved and why the researcher chose them (Yardley, 2000). Transparency can be achieved by providing an audit trail and also through reflexivity (Yardley, 2000). An audit trail was kept throughout the data analysis process in the form of coded transcripts, reflective notes about interviews and the analysis process, memos detailing the development of categories and their properties and dimensions, and diagrams of relationships between categories (and photographs of the interactive process between researchers).

## Data Analysis and Discussion

This section discusses the categories which create the theoretical codes of:

- Something's missing from life;
- Being someone who's connected;
- Caught in a Web; Making choices;
- Others responding, and
- Closing the box and picking up the pieces.

The section represents the results of the study and discusses this in the context of the larger literature. Clearly for reasons of space and cohesiveness it was necessary to limit the number of extracts used.

### Category One: I'm missing something

This category reflected the fact that for the majority of the young people interviewed, they spontaneously talked about something being wrong with, or missing from their lives, that going online might make better. The focused codes that made up this category included: Dealing with the bad things in life; Wanting to be understood; Needing space to do things my way, and Wanting to explore sex. These reflected a disparate group of needs, but suggested possible vulnerability, either through past problematic experiences, or current feelings of not being listened to, or understood, or a need to explore sexuality in ways that could not easily be accomplished offline.

#### i. Dealing with the bad things in life

Some of the bad things that had happened included sexual abuse, by family members and also by peers:

*"... my social worker had me moved away from my home because my father was abusing me"*

*“I was 14-years-old... I was on my way home from a party with some friends and I was about to take a short-cut across the football pitch where we lived because it would get us home quicker... someone came from behind and found me. Um... I know who it is but don't know them that well. One was in a parallel form to mine... I didn't notice them at first but felt that something was just up as I turned around... No, they took me to the ground and held me and started to undress me...”*

Noll, Shank, Barnes and Putman (2009), in their study of confirmed cases of sexually abused girls compared with those who were not sexually abused, found that abused girls were significantly more likely to have experienced online sexual advances and to have met someone offline. Having been abused and choosing a provocative ‘avatar’ were significantly and independently associated with online advances, and these in turn were associated with offline encounters. This has been similarly highlighted in the second survey by Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2007).

What was also discussed were difficult relationships with parents:

*“... she was out in the evenings, she'd be out during the day, she didn't bother to go to work, and couldn't even care less about not earning a living. And so she was glad to see me sitting in front of the computer, because she could then say: ‘you see what a good girl she is, she never does anything or goes anywhere, she doesn't get on my nerves or make me angry”*

Some of the bad things related to painful feelings and insecurities:

*“... I started cutting myself... Yes... I guess it was to get rid of everything which hurt so badly inside of me... get it out. It's easier to focus on physical pain than the other way around”*

*“And then I'll look in the mirror and I'll be like oh my god, I'm getting fat, and then I'll start getting really uncomfortable. And then I'll try and starve myself in the day”*

*“It was a way of hurting myself... I didn't think I was worth more”*

*“I can't remember the details any longer. I think it was a few years after my parents had gotten divorced and I was still a little sad about it”.*

These feelings of sadness, loneliness and insecurity have been associated in other studies with higher levels of online communication. Bonetti, Campbell and Gilmore (2010) found that in their sample, young people who self-reported being lonely communicated online significantly more frequently about personal and intimate topics than those who did not report loneliness. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) argued that there is evidence that overall socially anxious and lonely adolescents turn to the Internet for online communication less often than adolescents who are not lonely and socially anxious. However, they suggested that in line with a social compensation hypothesis, lonely and socially anxious adolescents do seem to prefer online to face-to-face communication and value its controllability.

## **ii. Wanting to be understood**

Subrahmanyam, Smahel and Greenfield (2006) have examined the extent to which adolescents use Internet communication for expressing developmental issues such as identity and sexuality, and suggest that they “use their time within online spaces (e.g. bulletin boards, chat rooms, blogs and instant messaging) to deal with the issues in their lives, including sexuality... identity... and partner selection” (Reich, Subrahmanyam & Espinoza, 2012, p 356). Clearly, establishing emotional connections with others is an important developmental task and Lenhart,

Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr (2010) have suggested that young people use the Internet to cultivate emotional ties. Within this study many of the young people felt that there were difficulties relating to people offline and a lack of those who were interested in them and willing to give time to listen:

*“... young girls generally, of a certain age, who don't have anyone to listen to them, who are alone, who see that their Mums and Dads are disinterested, minding their own business... who will naturally think it's good to look for people who seem to be interested and care on the Internet”*

*“I was feeling good about what was happening between him and me, because I felt as though it was cosy and it was fun and I kind of got the attention I felt that I had been missing”*

*“No, I only got affirmation that I was somebody”*

At times this was expressed as feeling that they were ‘on their own’ and that no-one was there to listen and support them:

*“I am unfortunately mainly on my own because no one ever has time to listen to me; no one ever has time. I'm always there when others have problems, but when I've had problems they say no thanks”*

While it appears that these needs were met by finding others online who were interested and prepared to listen, this is dissimilar to other survey data by Subrahmanyam and Lin (2007) who concluded that, “... our results showed that neither the total amount of time online nor time on e-mail was related to loneliness and perceived support from parents and close friends” (p 669):

*“I should have – what's it called? I should have talked together with my parents more about it. What was bothering me at the time. So*

*that I was not on the Net together with different people and writing and meeting together with them”.*

However, Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell and Ybarra (2008) have argued that there is evidence to support an assumption that adolescents who visit chatrooms are more likely to have problems with their parents and suffer from sadness, loneliness or depression. Beebe, Asche, Harrison and Quinlan (2004) have also indicated that for both boys and girls the use of Internet chat rooms is associated with psychological distress and difficult living environments.

### **iii. Needing space to do things my way**

Going online, and being online, were seen as opportunities to establish autonomy and find space to be one-self:

*“I was looking for security somehow. And I didn't think... and I was looking for a place where I could be... I mean some kind of free space when I was on the Net”.*

Valkenburg and Peter (2011) have suggested that that there is consensus that the overarching goal for adolescents is to achieve autonomy. However, parents attempting to restrict some online activities, by for example, controlling where a computer was accessed meant that for our respondents other strategies needed to be used:

*“When we had the desktop which was in the main room, I could minimise things and hide things very quick. ‘Cos you can hear when people are coming round”.*

*“Yeah, and offline as well, like lying to your family about what you are spending your time doing, where you actually went, who you are on the phone to”.*

Autonomy has been linked by Valkenburg and Peter (2011) with three developmental tasks: developing a firm sense of self or identity; developing a sense of intimacy, and developing their sexuality. Schouten, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) suggest that 1 in 3 of the adolescents sampled in their study preferred online communication over face to face communication to talk about intimate topics such as love, sex and things that they may feel ashamed about, and as we can see in the following, this was clearly the case for the young people in the present study.

#### **iv. Wanting to explore sex**

Within this sample, engagement with others online was not just about meeting emotional needs or being listened to, it was also about sexual curiosity. Kehily (2012) has drawn attention to the polarised debates around adolescent sexuality, particularly in relation to media, with at one extreme, argument about the commercialisation of sexuality (e.g. Palmer, 2006) and at the other an idealisation of girlhood and sexual innocence (Egan & Hawkes, 2008). As part of this discussion Kehily (2012) asks not whether girls are being prematurely sexualised but how can we understand this debate as a feature of time and place, and how does it relate to the lives of girls as they approach puberty and their first sexual experience. There was a diversity of sexual experiences within our sample of respondents, but for all there was demonstrated an interest in sex:

*“... ‘cos everyone just wanted sex, on these websites. And that was one thing that I wanted to experiment a lot more with as well”.*

*“It kind of took a huge step when we started texting one another using our cell phones. And it was mostly there that we agreed that we should meet. Uhh, and he was showing a lot of interest in me – and not just as a friend. I could feel that”.*

*“Yes, I do pretty often... that I simply must have sex and I simply must have it... it feels strange. I feel as if I must have someone touch me... and I can... I don't know. It just happens”.*

Other research (e.g. Olsson, 2010 cited by Lööf, 2012) in relation to a survey on consensual sexual experiences, found that the most positive aspects of engaging in online sex was that it was possible to have a relationship at a distance, where you could test out what you liked sexually, remain anonymous and reduce the risk of sexually transmitted disease. Online communication is thought to facilitate sexual self-exploration (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) and has been associated, for adolescent boys, with being gay or being uncertain about sexual orientation (Wolak et al., 2008). However, what was problematic in the encounters of the young people in this study was that such sexual activity online was also illegal, regardless of whether the young people themselves saw it as consensual:

*“I wanted gay people to talk to because I wanted to talk about how it felt to other people but I didn't know anyone at school and my friends knew no one because they were so young. So on my iPod I downloaded this gay chat app, because I went on there, set up a profile and started chatting to guys on there, and some guys were like oh, you're too young to talk to, bye, and didn't talk to me. But some were like oh yeah, it's fine, we can talk. So I got talking to guys and then one guy wanted to meet me and it all kicked off from there, to get into meeting up with guys”.*

## Category Two: Being someone who's connected

This category explored the importance of being connected for the young people in this study. It brought with it autonomy, the capacity to engage socially with new people as well as with those where friendships already existed. This category is made up by the codes: Being online; Who u r online; Meeting people; Being part of everyday life, and Changing things.

### i. Being online

In today's mediated existence you are always online. Being connected and being connectable is a way of being alive and showing that you exist. The interviews clearly revealed how young people managed their relationships and also how these oftentimes were framed by both online and offline experiences:

*"I'd be online 24 hours a day... I couldn't have cared less if the bill went up too high, because it was an easy way to interact with the outside world, outside, but also "real", it gave you a way to meet people... because I was very alone, I was alone and I didn't have anyone who gave me any support in anything".*

The online world was described as manageable and where it was possible to create a self that could be better than the one lived with offline. Mesch and Talmud (2006) argued that adolescents use the Internet not only to maintain social relationships with distant relatives and friends, but also to create new relationships online, some of which may become integrated into an existing social network:

*"And this girl was my age, though we were both pretending to be older than we were, we later found out we were the same age..."*

*"But you don't know anything, like what this person's like out of the internet, 'cos anyone can be anyone who you like on the internet".*

Different platforms were used interchangeably in order for the young person to express her/himself in the way s/he wanted to. Chats, blogs, mobile devices and social networking sites appeared in all the interviews, describing an online world similar to one described more generally by young people. The intensity of a relationship formed online was, for many, the exact reason why it was valued:

*"... by continuing to talk, at times by text messaging, or through chat rooms, a relationship developed through questions – how are you, what are you doing today, how was your day – in order to make friends, through these kinds of questions, questions that were apparently totally normal".*

However, the study by Mesch and Talmud (2006) also suggested that friendships that originate on the Internet are necessarily perceived as less close and supportive because they are relatively new and online friends are involved in less joint activities. For the respondents in the present study some relationships at times seemed 'not right', and typically the young person mentioned being uncomfortable about having to keep secrets about the contact, or described parts of their interaction as being strange. This may be the point at which being online becomes a part of the problem: it surpasses just being a tool, to becoming a way to soothe yourself, and the place where what is happening is normalised.

*"... you just kind of get really close to someone online".*

The self-soothing aspect of being online and seen as beautiful, desirable and smart soon outweighed the knowledge that it was not possible to fully trust a person online. The ease at which contacts were accessible made it even better:

*“It made everything much easier... it was easier to look for contacts. It didn't feel as real. I don't think I would have walked the streets. It was simply a matter of going onto the newspaper chatroom and at once there was an unlimited number...”*

In a content analysis of comments elicited from 13-19 year olds, the top ten words used to express how going online made them feel included: happy, connected, good, excited, free, entertained, bored, interested, sociable, and independent (Page & Mapstone, 2010). The study found that overall the web made young people feel positive, with over 56% (80) of emotional responses expressed classified as positive, 32% (46) as neutral, and only 12% (17) as negative. It may be no surprise that this also seemed to be the case within our sample.

## **ii. Who u r online**

To create your own image without having to take your history into account is an attractive aspect of being online. Online you can be who you want to be, you can even decide to be the other sex. Playing with identities is attractive as trying to understand who you are and what you want out of life is central during adolescent years.

*“– so I think that it was mostly something within myself. That I was having a hard time with – what do you call it? To figure things out and realize that I was actually doing OK”*

Everyone is aware of how you present yourself online and pictures, links or descriptions will inevitably place the young person in one category or another. There is awareness around profiles and identities online: about others watching and drawing conclusions from what they see. Mesch and Beker (2010) in their secondary analysis of the 2006 Pew and American Life Survey of parents and teens data set provided support for the idea that, “online realms in general and CMC in particular constitute a

separate normative realm. Participation in the online environment and disclosure of personal information was positively associated with norms of disclosure of online identity and in most cases not associated with norms of disclosure of offline identity information. It seems that privacy behavior in online environments differs from FtF behavior and supporting the generative perspective can create a separate set of norms about the disclosure of personal information, at least partially unrelated to the norms of everyday behavior.” (p 588). However, Sengupta and Chaudhuri (2011) concluded that online attitudes and behaviours of teenagers, which includes the amount of information they disclose in the public domain, the way they use the Internet and the manner in which they interact with people, is central in determining whether they become subject to online harassment and cyber-bullying. This includes uploading pictures of themselves accessible to all users:

*“You know they look at your profile five times a day. You want to seem happy and stuff, and a lot of the purpose of Facebook is making your life look like it's better than other people's”*

*“Yeah, and how to make the most attractive profile picture, to have the most photos, to have the most friends, to have people write on your wall all the time to go to these places to have photos taken at such and such place, to have a photo of you taken in clubs”*

Who you are is also linked to what you read and how you react. Online the young person may strive to seem brave and mature, not prudish or frightened, although this is not unique to young people that have come to harm. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) have suggested that online communication might enhance the controllability of self-presentation and self-disclosure which creates a sense of security and allows young people to feel freer in their interpersonal interactions. They concluded that three features of online communication encourage this: enhanced controllability; anonymity, asynchronisation and accessibility.

*“Yeah. I think it’s because you can read into how, what people are saying, however you like. They could say something nasty and you could take it in a good way. ‘Cos you can’t, you just can’t see their facial expressions or whether they’re shouting or not online”.*

*“And you can say what you like, you could be really nasty to someone and they can’t do anything because you’re hiding behind technology”.*

All of these young people experienced differences between communicating online versus offline contacts and this is not specific to young people coming to harm. Nor is the intensified use of online technologies they all display around the time of the abusive incident or incidents. What was evident, and what may be special to those abused, is how use of the Internet seemed to shift from being a tool for self-determination and agency to becoming a method for self-soothing behaviour. Smahel, Brown and Blinka (2012), in the context of Internet addiction, found among adolescents an association with communication styles, hours spent online and friendship approaches.

*“...did you talk every day? Yes, every day, three to five times a day, telephone calls, and then there a must have been some 70-odd text messages.”*

Being connected becomes one of few ways in which a young person can feel good about themselves:

*“I wanted to. I wanted to spend all my time on the computer just talking to these other people because they’re more interesting and nicer”.*

*“But we had been in there chatting... and if only you log on and call yourself something special... like Jessica 15 there are loads of them. Guys write to you. You’ll get loads of proposals”.*

### **iii. Meeting people**

Being able to connect meant meeting new people. Connecting to others meant belonging. Having a circle of friends meant being like others and being normal. The yearning to belong and to be seen and listened to was evidenced across all interviews:

*“Maybe...I was talking to maybe like 200 people, I don’t know, over time. Quite of lot of them were...I don’t know. Yeah, probably quite a few of them we should be worried about. But the thing is, you don’t really know”.*

*“... it was a site where you could meet people, and they said there was also a chat room, and so I looked for my usual group of friends and we chatted...”*

To some the reasons for being connected were important: a move from one part of the country to another made keeping in touch with friends difficult or may reflect restrictions placed by parents. Lee and Boyer (2007) have discussed the usefulness of social networking sites, such as Facebook, in maintaining friendships over long distances. However, Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt and Chamorro-Premuzic (2012) concluded from a review of research on Facebook that while users may benefit from feeling more socially included because they participate in such communities, particularly if they feel isolated from other people in the real world, where online engagement is a form of avoidant coping this may mean less likelihood of facing real-world problems.

*“So it has been a little difficult to hang onto my friends at home after I was gone for the 8th and 9th grades, you know? I’ve been away from home, and it’s hard to return home and find a new circle of acquaintances just like that”.*

However, in reality young people in the interviews were careful about delineating between people in real life situations and people online:

*“... if I’m at a party or maybe at the beach or something – then you can meet people there. I certainly don’t feel comfortable getting to know the people who are on the Net – because you never know who is hiding behind the computer I’m writing to. It could be anybody”.*

It appeared that the online relationships that were valued were the ones where there was a possibility of developing a true relationship or friendship, i.e. an offline friendship:

*“Friends?..... more like acquaintances I’d say..... people I know who they are..... I have like..... several hundred friends there, but they aren’t really friends. They are more like.... well... some people I know the name of but who aren’t really friends. I could have a coffee with them and stuff but not really be with them”.*

Survey data with adolescents by Reich, Subrahmanyam and Espinoza (2012) demonstrated that in their sample adolescents mainly used social network sites to connect with others, often known in the offline world, with online contexts being used to strengthen offline relationships. For all of the young people in our sample the majority of their offline relationships also had this online component, although the quality of those where face-to-face contact was made was important.

*“The friends I have on Facebook – they’re all people I’ve met in real life”.*

#### **iv. Part of everyday life**

Computer skills are useful and the way it has become a part of everyday life also meant that the increasing amount of time online went

largely unnoticed and unmonitored by parents, and managed without intrusions from others. Barreto and Adams (2011) have emphasised the importance of parents continuing to keep an open dialogue with adolescents emphasising responsible use of the Internet. As will be seen later, this absence of discussion was often viewed with regret following the abusive experiences:

*“It’s such a vicious place, the internet, though”.*

*“Yes, but there are films, pictures and stuff and then you can find men there. You should check it out because there is a lot of crap there. Everything from sex with animals and children and everything”.*

Making the adult world understand what the online world consists of is a recurring theme in the way our informants discuss their experiences. Learning to use the technology is referred to almost like learning to read:

*“So, yeah, ‘cos from a small age in a school you’re taught how to use a computer, and a lot of work is done via a computer. So you know your ways around it, and the internet’s not really that hard to pick up, so. I picked it up pretty quick. And then when I was 15 or 16 I just, could use it whenever I liked”.*

However, many respondents conceded that they would not want to let go of the advantages their better skills in handling online platforms bring. The ease of connecting in everyday life was highly valued:

*“Yeah, especially now. I’ve got my Facebook connected to my phone, twitter, blackberry messenger, ‘cos I’ve got a blackberry, so if I can, MSN. I’ve even got MSN on my phone, so I’ve got all my forms of contact on the phone now”.*

*“Yeah, it’s like if you meet someone and you click, you go oh I met them on Facebook and if they go oh I haven’t got Facebook you’re like, what do you mean you haven’t got Facebook, hello, who doesn’t have Facebook?”*

#### **v. Changing things**

In the interviews young people talked about the differences in the way that they viewed some friendships, which in part was related to being mediated by technology:

*“And I look back and think, if I hadn’t spoken to him online I wouldn’t even have given him the time of day”.*

Being online, for some of the respondents, made them feel less shy and less restricted. Baker and Oswald (2010), in a study with University students, were able to demonstrate an interaction between shyness and Facebook usage. Individuals who measured high in ‘shyness’ reported stronger associations between Facebook use and friendship quality. They concluded that online social networking sites may provide a comfortable environment in which shy individuals can interact with others. For many of the girls in the present study this online engagement was cherished precisely because it made them feel less shy and more mature:

*“As in, when you spoke you were behind a screen so it wasn’t like... as in he wasn’t ashamed because he said the same stuff in reality too but... I did say more at the computer than when we met. ‘Cause then I was just quiet”.*

#### **Category Three: Caught in a web**

The young people in this study described how their sexual activity online, in one way or other, drew them into events that became destructive. Soo and Bodanovskaya (2011) concluded that ‘It is apparent that the more young people are open to online sexual activities (especially flirting and having sexual conversations with strangers), the more probable it is that they may become victims of sexual harassment, solicitation or grooming’ (p. 49). The category ‘Caught in a Web’ was made up of: Seeming like a normal relationship; Telling lies; Being groomed; Losing control, and Betrayal. While our respondents did not always talk about what happened in a sequential way, what was said did seem to reflect a process of engagement which became problematic and from which it was difficult to extricate oneself.

#### **i. Seeming normal**

Contextualising meeting someone offline as ‘normal’, where there was a strong suspicion, and on some occasions knowledge, that this was sexual, was evidenced throughout the interviews:

*“I just waited and then there’s a car, like a nice car came, was like a nice young guy in and he was okay, and I was like, oh it’s him”*

*“... helped make the whole thing seem more normal than it was, like something completely normal”*

*“I just think I was curious. I sat and I thought ‘why not?’ Now I have the chance to... to meet someone new. Or something like that”*

*“Well, it was just like a normal relationship, it was kind of cute and cuddly and it wasn’t all about sex like it was with the other guys”.*

At times, it appeared as if the relationship was seen in an idealised way:

*“But the more we spoke and the more we discussed things, the more attractive he became. And then that’s what, and then after him saying he’d seen me, and obviously saying he thought that I was cute, it kind of gives you a bit more confidence and you think, mm, and I thought it would be easy”*

*“... there was a relationship that lasted about six months, which in fact apparently seemed to be a good, happy relationship for both of us”.*

*“And when I met him it was like this angel had come down to greet me. I think it’s ‘cos the feelings, I’d already developed the feelings, to how he was online, and I’d already kind of fallen for him. But he was an absolute dick in real life. But I just looked past that because of how nice he was online”*

Reference was also made as to the unacceptability for others of meeting someone offline, and the ambiguity felt by these young people:

*“Yeah. I don’t think I did anything wrong. I still don’t think I did anything wrong really. Okay, you probably shouldn’t do that, but I know it’s wrong, but to me, it’s not wrong. It’s only wrong because the law says it’s wrong, or because society looks down on it, but it’s not really that wrong”.*

*“... if it had been natural that an 11-year old and a 19-year-old or an 18-year-old were together – then it wouldn’t have been a problem. Uhh – but it is, of course, and that was why it became a problem”*

It was also apparent that for some young people there was a close correspondence between prior offline experiences and what young people expected to engage in when they met offline the person met online.

*“I liked him... we started kissing straight away and after a while... well, we ended up in bed together. I wanted to do it; you know it wasn’t my first time”*

Sevicikova and Konecny (2011) in a survey of male and female 17-year-olds found that those who reported offline sexual experiences tended to engage in online sexual activities more often than those who did not, and while online communication and self-disclosure may not be related to the quality of the friendship, online communication is positively related to self-disclosure (Wang, Jackson & Zhang, 2011).

## **ii. Telling lies**

Telling lies in the context of meeting someone reflected being made to keep secret what was happening, and possibly suggested conflict over what was being done and the fact that it could not be disclosed to others:

*“... that it was kind of – a little strange when he said something about how I shouldn’t say anything about it to my parents”*

*“All of the sexual things he wanted me to do. And the fact that I had to keep lying to my parents – I had a really hard time with that”*

However telling lies was in one instance used to make sure that the meeting actually happened:

*“... and I told him I was 18 even though I was about 14”*

In this case the young person had negotiated payment to meet the person and wanted to ensure that he agreed to turn up. However, in some cases telling lies was also used to engage the young person:

*“... he wrote a private message... uh... which I responded to. He told me he was 20-years-old, which I believed at the time”.*

*“So it kind of makes you think, oh well he doesn’t want a relationship so he’s not going to be looking for sex. And he’s happy to be friends, so you kind of, it makes you feel safe when people say that. Well it did at the time”*

There appears to have been little research on adolescent lying, although Elaad, Lavy, Cohenca, Berholz, Thee and Ben-Gigi (2012) suggested that adolescents present unique attributes, such as spending large amounts of time with their peers, and often telling lies to their parents in an attempt to achieve greater autonomy, which is clearly seen in the above extracts.

### **iii. Being groomed**

The one subject that was talked about the most by our respondents related to how it had happened that what seemed in some ways so normal or desirable, turned into the opposite. As researchers we struggled to find a way of expressing this, and eventually concluded that it felt like a form of manipulation. The initial approaches made by offenders took place in the online environment, although there were clearly differences in how these approaches were realised:

*“... this guy starts to contact me, introduces himself as an 18-year-old boy who’s also living in Rome. He whips up this whole story about himself, how he’s studying, how he’d like to work with animals because he likes them so much, he send me a photo of his dog... who knows whether at least the dog was actually his!”*

*“... by continuing to talk, at times by text messaging, or through chat rooms, a relationship developed through questions – how are you,*

*what are you doing today, how was your day – in order to make friends through these kinds of questions, questions that were apparently totally normal”*

*“he... would always put me some money on my mobile account”*

At least some of these young people felt flattered by the attention that they were being given:

*“One day I got an anonymous call and the guy really thought I was a 17-year-old. And so he immediately introduced himself: ‘Hi, I’m Dino, I wanted to say hello – you’re really beautiful”*

*“... because we were meeting more often – so I kind of felt as though it was a more natural friendship”*

*“He was straight away like God you’re sexy and stuff”*

*“And we had gone to the supermarket and he was going to make me roast potatoes and pork for dinner and stuff, and he was like, ‘I don’t want to have sex with you as soon as we get to the house, I want it to be special at night.”*

For some of the respondents this was not the first time that they had engaged sexually with others online, which had sometimes involved an exchange of pictures. Durrant, Frohlich, Sellen & Uzzell (2011) interviewed a small group of young people about their use of photographs and found practices almost entirely hidden from parents, in which teenagers “shared pictures of themselves and their friends through the screens of their Internet-enabled computers.” (p 121). They concluded that, “technology used in this context provided a medium through which teens broke away from their childhood identities and literally ‘left home’ to inhabit another social space online.” (p 121).

*“Yeah I did. I used to get quite a lot of messages about, oh you’re attractive and then I started to reveal a lot more in my pictures. And then certain, you’d chat to people and they’d asked, you know, have you got any cock pictures? No. They went, oh take some, I’ve got some here. So kind of well, over the time I’d reveal more, I’d put more on. And yeah, I was flattered”.*

*“I felt.. you can’t have sex with someone through the computer screen ha ha.. but then like he... and he wanted you to send pictures and stuff, when he was wanking behind the screen”.*

The role of sexualised images often predated the relationship with the offender. For some respondents they related to earlier relationships, sometimes with young people they knew in the offline world. Heverly (2008) has pointed out that there is little, if any, explicit recognition among young people that digital media may not only be used by them, but in fact may use them. This is expressed very powerfully in the following: ‘when young people become the subject (or object, if you will) of digital media, they are used by it; when a digital media artefact – a digital media file of any type, for example video, audio, still image, text – that features them is created, part of them becomes entangled with the digital media and forms the substance of it’ (p. 199).

*“I was seeing a boy and I sent him a few photos, which then shortly thereafter surfaced on the Internet, that is shortly after he broke up with me. They surfaced on a homepage, where I was completely levelled and made to look like a slut”.*

*“Cos I have had my pictures stolen online. People have used my pictures before”.*

These images were often associated with feelings of distress and a perception that there was a loss of control, sometimes accompanied by threats from the offender:

*“It doesn’t feel... much fun knowing that someone can stumble across them. And neither do I know how much you can see... whether you can see that it’s me... ‘cause I don’t know how they are taken”.*

*“It was that he... well he started asking me if I had a good body and started getting kind of offensive towards me and that kind of thing. Forced me to take pictures of myself, because otherwise he would come over to my home. And he knew where I lived and that kind of thing”.*

*“Yes. I said that I wasn’t going to send them. Because it was something – I didn’t want to show him my body that way. And that I didn’t want to expose myself in front of him and that kind of thing...”*

Manipulation also took the form of isolating the young person after meeting them face-to-face, and cutting them off from others they were close to:

*“So he cut me off from everyone... and then there was my family whom he knew I was close with but... he sat there and, as in, I had to switch off my phone all the time”.*

#### **iv. Being overpowered – experiencing sexual abuse and sexual violence**

This loss of control, for these young people, challenged their sense of personal agency both in the online environment and offline:

*“Before, I have always told my boyfriends that ‘listen, if it doesn’t suit piss off’ and that, I have always been the one in control and*

*almost bossed them around. Now he was the one who had taken control”.*

*“... I mean on the computer you’re just sitting and writing...you can just write anything. But when you say something then you kind of have to have your arguments in order. I mean, you really have to have a good reason not to go up against him. When he’s sitting there talking to you. That’s how I felt, at least... just how you said that you didn’t feel like it. And then when he asked why. Like that.”.*

*“There had been no decision to go on a date... as in we were meant to meet to spend time and talk. It wasn’t intended to be a further contact to meet or spend time... rather it was.. I don’t know... I didn’t decide much about what was to be done. I guess he was the one who took the initiative or who decided”.*

The decision to meet, and what followed afterwards, was described by most as the ultimate loss of control:

*“... we started just by seeing a little television... casual and everything. Then – what’s it called? He said to me that we should go to his room and I should lie down on the bed. I didn’t really think about it at the time. So when I lay down on the bed, he just casually started to take my trousers off and, well things continued from there”.*

*“It wasn’t very nice to lie there and think while he was doing it. And that wasn’t exactly the thought running through my head – I was just thinking about getting home and climbing into bed. Taking a bath to begin with”.*

Sometimes the sexual acts were seen as less than ideal, but still as an expression of love:

*“At that time it felt partly right, because I was in love and that. It was as if we were a couple but maybe that isn’t the way you want to have sex your first time – like up against a car”.*

*No, well he...I don’t know. He put his arm around me. He was like “Are you still nervous”, I was like, “Kind of.”*

But for many of these young people the sexual assault was experienced as aggressive or humiliating:

*“So I stayed at his and it wasn’t until the morning, which was when it got really bad, was, I was woken up by him banging my head against the metal pole of the metal headrest of the bed, and that’s when he raped me”.*

*“I didn’t really do anything. Because I was just lying there, petrified by fear. And there wasn’t really anything I could do... it was the first time”.*

*“... it wasn’t pain just then because that came later...”.*

*“A flat ... well they ... like had sex with me. Like oral, anal and ... what’s it called ... They were at it for like two hours. I thought ... that it was a dream ... it hurt ... I didn’t know who they were. I had never seen them before.”*

For some of these young people, online sexual relations that resulted in off-line contact had taken place on more than one occasion. For some, this was in the context of selling sexual activity online, whereas for others it was part of actively seeking sexual experiences. This is illustrated in the following extract from a male respondent who was 13 years of age at the time of the sexual activity:

*“The only one that did was, well, one guy in October, because I met two in two days in October, he was pinning me down. And one, he was trying to have anal with me but it was really hurting me but he said he wouldn’t take it out and stuff like that, and then he eventually did. The guy in September was trying to force me into it but I told him no and he eventually listened. The first time I did have anal sex, in a car, the guy, I said it was hurting could you stop, and he was like, ‘just one more minute, just one more minute,’ and he didn’t stop until he had finished. But yeah”.*

However, for these young people the sexual assault was often accompanied by feelings of guilt, which may have served to silence them. Silence is a feature of the few studies where sexual abuse has taken place and photographs have been taken (Quayle, Löf & Palmer, 2008). The children in Svedin and Back’s (1996; 2003) studies were reluctant to disclose the abuse, and these authors suggested that the recording of the abuse through photography exacerbated, and in some cases prevented, disclosure. Even when confronted with the visual evidence of their abuse, children continued to limit disclosure, telling people only what they thought they already knew. Silbert (1989) had earlier coined the phrase ‘silent conspiracy’ to describe this silence. It is unclear as to whether the sense of shame and humiliation, often reported in these studies, relates to the photography itself or the fact of disclosing it to others.

*“At the time it didn’t feel like a rape. It was more like it was my fault. I was in love with one of them and I had [got] drunk so I couldn’t remember anything... well”.*

*“It got worse after the second rape... it was the same guy and then I thought that it had to... then I only had myself to blame in some way...”.*

*“... that time having sex with him disgusted me and he continued to make videos and I felt so incredibly ashamed and thought that it would never end, and I felt how I did when my father did those disgusting things to me...”.*

*“I thought, ‘I can’t go to the police with a film where I’m smiling’. They will just say that I have myself to blame”.*

There was also, for some, threats about what might happen if the young person said anything:

*“He starts to threaten me, asks where the hell I think I’m going. I also get pissed off and then he pulls out his mobile and shows me the little videos he’s made of us having sex and says something like, ‘so where the hell do you think you’re going? If you leave I’ll show these to everyone, I’ll put them on the Internet and people can spit on you”.*

However, within our sample of respondents there were negative cases that concerned sexual agency, often related to a young person seemingly taking the initiative for the sexual acts:

*“Yeah, I was like right, well, before we start talking I said I’m 13 and I hope you’re okay with that, and I just need guys I can talk to, to help me because I’m struggling. He was like yeah, it’s fine, we can talk and if you want we can meet up for coffee in Leeds and stuff. So I was like, ‘yeah, sounds good.’ And then after a few weeks of talking to him we started getting a bit flirty with each other, and then he was like, ‘do you want to meet up for sex?’ And I was like, ‘yeah, I’m up for that, I want to try it for the first time.’ And that’s how it started off.”*

*“Yeah, but he didn’t want to. I was like, ‘Oh do you have a condom?’ He was like, ‘No I thought you didn’t want to have sex.’ Oh I do”.*

This young person had also negotiated a price for meeting the offender, and was active in making sure that the money was paid:

*“Went to the bank. No, I got back into the car and went to the bank, and he got money out, and gave it me. And then I went to town and bought loads of clothes and perfume”.*

Other respondents had been involved also in selling sex online, often in the context of an abusive relationship, where the exchange of money was through a ‘pimp’. Svedin and Priebe (2007) conducted a population-based study in Sweden to examine the characteristics of young people who sell sex. Amongst their findings was that adolescents who sold sex were characterised by having had a greater number of sexual experiences, a greater preoccupation with sex, relatively early sexual debut, and experience with sexual abuse as victim and/or perpetrator. In the present study the language used to describe these encounters was often explicit and expressed a very different set of emotions than in the previous extracts:

*“Only men. It was from 20 to 70 years old... was the oldest geezer, Bill I think his name was... he took pictures and got down to it. He had a wife at home and children and grandchildren... and he was so disgusting if you think, you know... as in a shaved old man of 70... as in shaved balls...”.*

For this respondent, as for others, what was also confusing was that during the abusive encounters there were times when they responded sexually:

*“Then it felt like there was something wrong in my head”.*

## **Category Four: Making choices**

During the development of an online relationship the young person makes a number of choices. The first one is in some cases a very difficult one: Should I respond to the contact attempt at all? For many young people the contact initially was seen as positive and a part of being on-line.

This category is made up of: Don’t tell or do tell; Maintaining control; Choosing how to engage and What does disclosure lead to.

### **i. Don’t tell or do tell (disclosure)**

Several of the interviewees maintained that they chose to stay in a relationship with the offender, or that whatever happened was of their own making. Some also maintained that having sex was their choice and that they could still remember feelings of frustration and anger when the contact was disrupted and nullified by the actions of others:

*“... first I felt anger because she [mother] was taking away from me a person who I thought cared about me, and so I was angry because that was what she was meant to be doing, being close to me. So I blamed her for my having had to look for these things in other people.”*

An obvious part of remaining in contact with someone you know your parents or your carers would not approve of is to keep the relationship a secret. Keeping a secret was again a way of staying in control, but lying to people you are close to was different and sometimes burdensome:

*“I was having a hard time with him, because I didn’t want to lie to my parents – uhh, and that I actually wanted to break it off. I said it to him. Uh, but he wouldn’t really let that happen. So there, I – so at the time I talked a little, and he got sad. And I got sad. And, uh, and*

*then it ended up with me – then I went home and we kept writing to one another and saw one another again”.*

Keeping secrets is also a way of protecting yourself from being intruded upon once you have disclosed the sexual abuse. This is similar to the findings by Svedin and Back discussed in relation to the previous category. In some of the interviews the young person confided in friends without explicitly wishing them to intervene or to disclose, while in others the opposite was the case:

*“... my friends, I tended not to pay much attention to them. Because some had the same reaction as me in that they were happy for me, while others urged me to open my eyes. But I obviously listened only to those who shared in my happiness”*

Not only did the lies contextualise the events into being a thing that cannot be mentioned. Lies and secrecy made any disclosure more difficult:

*“I didn’t tell and because of that there was nobody who could do anything... like... it... is... impossible to know unless I say something...”*

*“Well do you mean about the rape.... I didn’t tell anyone. My friend found me afterwards... but I said that I didn’t want to talk about it. But because of the pictures and the films the rumour spread quickly at school. I don’t know exactly who knew and who didn’t. I did go to a counsellor but didn’t say anything. I’m sure....she was a very good counsellor but I couldn’t say anything”*

Disclosing sexual abuse is an arduous process for most young people. McGregor, Glover and Gautam (2010) have discussed the feeling of shame, self-blame and a fear that they will not be believed expressed by adults who survive child sexual abuse, and this was also clearly seen

in our adolescent respondents. Staller and Nelson-Gardell (2005) have suggested that telling about child sexual abuse is a dialogical process that is renegotiated and influenced by each experience of disclosure. McElvaney, Greene and Hogan (2012) in their qualitative study of young peoples’ experiences of disclosure suggest that it is a process best conceptualised as, “one of containment, involving the dynamics of actively withholding information, a pressure cooker effect and confiding” (p 1169). Schaeffer Leventhal and Gottsegen Asnes (2011) in their interviews with child sexual abuse victims aged 3-18 years found that barriers to disclosure identified by the children could be categorised into five groups. These were: threats made by the perpetrator; fears (for example, that something bad would happen if a disclosure was made); lack of opportunity to disclose; a lack of understanding on the part of the child that abuse had taken place, and having a relationship with the perpetrator, which conceptualised that person as a friend. With the respondents in the present study it seemed as though talking about the events brought back feelings of uncertainty and fears of yet again losing control. For all these young people the disclosure was difficult and often something that happened without their own making. It was described as almost accidental and with consequences they had not counted on:

*“It’s not something you want your mum to know. ...Yeah, and then...oh, I told my friend about it on MSN... I was like, oh, so I admitted to like...but I lied...And then the next day she called the police or something, and told the police or something, and I just lied to them about it”.*

The lack of understanding about how to involve people close to them got in the way for some respondents:

*“No ... after that I felt that I ... couldn’t tell anybody ... I couldn’t even tell my siblings. I couldn’t even tell my siblings ... and we are really close”.*

At the same time, these extremely upsetting events in the young persons' lives required them to act and to try to find solace. Very often talking to friends was seen as a way of comforting themselves:

*"I wasn't going to tell anyone. I had promised him not to. But anyway I felt so bad at the time and then I didn't know what to do so I said it". [About when telling a friend]*

Friends however may very well find it difficult to respond in a way that gives the kind of reassurance that the young person is looking for:

*"And I didn't really talk together with anyone my age about it – only my best friend there. But it wasn't like that. He didn't really want to talk about it".*

Disclosure inevitably meant relinquishing part of the control, and may result in others being told:

*"Well I didn't tell anyone in the family at all really. I told my friend in school about it and then she went and told the head of sixth form and then the police were involved, social services were involved, then the family found out".*

For most of the young people interviewed, the abuse and the circumstances around the abuse was very much on their minds. They talked about how they had attempted to signal the abuse to people close to them, possibly wishing not to have to take on any responsibility for the disclosure, and they also recalled how others had reacted at times when the abuse felt extra burdensome:

*"... and once I had hugged my dad and just held him and said that I didn't want to leave. So dad thought it was a bit strange. He thought*

*that, like this, they have probably just had a fight. It wasn't something he thought about the first time and since I acted very well too he didn't connect it at all".*

*"... and then I thought that I cannot tell my parents because they will be just as sad as him. So then I thought that ... I cannot tell anyone about this".*

McElveney et al. (2012) suggested that conceptualizing the experience of abuse as a syndrome of secrecy highlights the adaptive function for the child of maintaining the secret. However, where there were strong feelings of trust between parents and the young person, the disclosure seemed easier to make and opened up possible ways of receiving support:

*"Of course I told my parents. And I told my support- and contact person, the police, psychologists – the ones I went to. And of course my best friend's mother, and my aunt knew about it. We live next door to one another, and she has been a really good support. If I was ever feeling down, I could go over to her place, and instead of talking about it, we would just sit there and watch a film...".*

There were different reasons for reporting the abuse. Several of the interviewees reported that they understood that the abuser could be out there attempting to abuse others:

*"I made a report. Yes, and I thought that if he abused more he could do it again. As in I just thought that I was the only one that stupid. So I did it to help others ... and so it happened that you helped yourself nevertheless".*

## ii. Maintaining control

*“I was going mad, not knowing how to keep things, the videos, under control, I’d sneak into the teachers’ office where there was a computer with internet access. Once a teacher caught me and in the end I just let it all burst out even though I felt ashamed”.*

Control was an issue that arose in different ways during the interviews: taking control of your online life and being in control of the information about the abuse. Controlling who knows what happened was for many of the interviewees vital and, in some instances, the young person and the family discussed exactly what to tell to teachers, relatives and friends. Since one aspect of the abusive process has been the loss of control, albeit often described as giving away control, regaining control and being part of the discussions about control became one aspect of recovery:

*“Nobody knows about it outside of the four of us”. [The immediate family]*

*“But I don’t want to have it spread around the entire town so that everybody knows about it and everything. It’s only to people I trust”.*

As with disclosure processes in offline child sexual abuse cases, the turning point where the young person decided to disclose was often when control over the situation was entirely lost, often brutally so:

*“... he then threatened to tell it to my parents. And he said that he didn’t care that he would go to prison and that kind of thing. And at the time I just thought that he shouldn’t be the one to say it. So I wrote a note on a piece of paper and gave it to my dad and went up to my room”.*

## iii. Choosing how to engage

The manner in which disclosure was made naturally differed from one situation to the other. Jones (2000) emphasised the importance of distinguishing between formal and informal disclosures in such contexts as forensic interviews and informal disclosures to family or friends. Often the disclosure happened outside of the control of the young person, but where the young person felt that there was a choice and that they can engage in a specific way, it seemed more likely that they would take the opportunity to do so:

*“I had – I think that I had deliberately chosen to tell it to my father first, because I had a hard time telling it to my mother. Because I just love my mom so much. And because I think that it would be something that would be difficult to talk with her about, I think. And I wanted to be done with it. And I thought that my father – that he would be the best one to start talking about it with, because – yes – that’s just how it has always felt somehow – uh...”.*

It appeared that for our respondents there seemed to be particular people who they felt they could disclose to, and this is something that may be important for those working with these young people.

*“It wouldn’t have been my parents – I wouldn’t have done that. I don’t have that much trust in – I trust my parents, but not enough to tell them. And they don’t know what happened – not in detail”.*

*“Well – it wasn’t particularly fun for me to write something like that to my father. Because I was afraid about what they would think about me and that kind of thing. And what would happen next. I kept thinking that if they could get me out of there, it would be – it would be worth it”.*

Actively seeking support in order to be able to leave the situation you feel stuck in is reported in this context, giving reason to believe that different ways of assistance should be available:

*“Um ... as then I was ... I just wanted it to end. And then I had searched online for a while and checked what there was and I randomly found the Emergency help. That was what caught my eye. I could tell from their website that they really ... that they really wanted to help people. I could feel it. My gut said yes. So I sent an e-mail and told my story – a bit. Mostly I had e-mails, a couple of hours afterwards. Then I replied to that e-mail and later that night they had their msn drop-in so then I spoke to a girl and then I said that I need to see someone, preferably tomorrow. And then I was given Lisa’s telephone number and then I rang her. I don’t know why I chose to tell at that precise moment ... chance, I guess. I couldn’t take it anymore”.*

When the abuse was discovered rather than disclosed, the process was far from being controlled by the young person, who often gave an image of a chaotic train of events. This may not be the view shared by those professionals involved in the case, who may well have handled the issue with due diligence. However from the perspective of the young person there is loss of control over who was told, what was told, when it was told and by whom. This was inevitably perceived as frightening. When speaking about it, the young people gave an impression of lots of people knowing, talking, making them repeat things and being ignorant about life online. Malloy, Brubacher and Lamb (2011) have examined the expected consequences of disclosure by suspected victims of child sexual abuse. In their sample of 204 5-to-13-year-olds nearly half of the children spontaneously talked about negative consequences, which included physical harm and feeling negative emotions for the child, along

with jail or legal consequences for the suspect. Expecting consequences for the child or another family member were thought to delay the disclosure:

*“And then I spoke to the police and then social services came in, and then I had to tell them the same story. And then I had to go back to the police, I went home, and then I had to tell my parents”.*

*“Yes, well, they said that the police had called and told them that I had been involved in something with a paedophile. Somebody on the Net who was named something or other. And that we had to go in and talk with the police about it”.*

*“There was noise and activity all around you and that kind of thing. What I needed was more quiet and to be able to just stare off into space and just experience quiet and a sense of security. That you didn’t need to say something – and then suddenly I would be able to talk about it”.*

And the only way to avoid the mess that child protection involvement seemed to bring to their lives was to refuse to talk:

*“I didn’t want to talk to social services ... not to anybody ... I had never put words, never expressed. Not taken it in my mouth and said it. I left and sent an e-mail to the teacher and said that ... I couldn’t”.*

In cases where the abuse was discovered rather than disclosed, often people that possibly should not have known were told:

*“...they then told my brother, and I felt so small then, ‘cos I hated my brother at the time. And I thought, why are you telling him that, do you know what I mean? And it was really horrible”.*

However, often discovery by another person happened in such a way as to suggest that there really was a strong wish by the young person for someone to take notice and to take serious action:

*“... she happened to see, as I accidentally left my computer on with a photo of him on the screen”.*

*“Well, when I started secondary school, or it wasn't until ninth grade that we had a teacher, a female teacher that we started keeping a book of reflections at the end of the lesson. Then she had written an answer for the next lesson. And for me it became like a way ... I often wrote how I felt and that and about the life of an ordinary teenager, but then there was the other thing, parts which showed that you didn't feel very well. That you weren't ... that things weren't quite alright ... even if I didn't write what”.*

To many young people the involvement of the police or of child protection professionals continued to be unexplained to this day:

*“Exactly, and then I didn't understand why the police were getting involved when I thought there was nothing wrong, and nothing did happen to me, so I didn't understand why they wanted to report down something like abuse when no one was actually really abused”.*

And yet again to others, to relinquish all efforts to control the course of events was felt as a relief:

*“... once the social worker and police became involved I felt much better”.*

*“I felt relieved after I had said it. Uh, but at the same time I was very scared about how my parents would react. Uh, whether they would be angry at me and that kind of thing”.*

The way parents, other adults and peers understood what had happened was an issue of great concern. In a comprehensive review of the literature examining the reactions of non-offending parents to child disclosure of child sexual abuse Elliott and Carnes (2001) reported that this reaction is related to the adjustment of the child with the support of a parent being a strong predictor of the positive adjustment of the victim following disclosure of abuse, and may be more influential on a victim's adjustment than factors related to the abuse acts. Deblinger et al. (1999) found that children who reported that their mother's parenting style was rejecting rather than accepting were more likely to report greater symptoms of depression. Yancey and Hansen (2010) in their examination of factors related to outcome of child sexual abuse concluded that parental support is a significant predictor of outcome and that a parent's distress and mental health difficulties may negatively impact on their ability to provide that support. Often the young people in our study expressed a high level of anxiety about how their parents would react:

*“...just my mother. I was terrified that she would be angry or wouldn't believe me. Instead, she believed me and started to cry and apologised for not having been at all aware of any of it. I cried as well”.*

*“... my family made me feel ashamed, but then after a while they realised that they were not behaving in the best possible way, and simply told me that if I had any kind of problem they would be there to help in any way they could”.*

#### **iv. What does disclosure lead to?**

To those young people that chose disclosure, the result was needing to orient themselves around the adults who were offering assistance. This was a period marked by strong ambivalent feelings towards the perpetrator and also towards parents and others that, for some reason, had

become involved. To many the assistance was appreciated but many talked about difficulties in expressing their needs:

*“It was horrible. And I was knackered and, yeah, because I didn’t tell anyone but then I started self-harming and that’s when my friends in school noticed the cuts on my arms, and they were saying, and that’s when I said, you know, what had happened.... Yeah, then everything goes on in your head, and then you just get really confused, mixed up, really depressed.... And then after that was, I very... obviously the police got involved and social services and all that got involved, so it kind of did destroy my life for a bit”.*

*“You felt guilty for involving so many ... like my boyfriend got to testify about all the nightmares I had and ... so you involved a lot of people ...”*

*“I was feeling so inconsolable, I had to get used to the idea of never hearing from him again, after what had been 24 hours a day contact... and the break from my Mum and Dad was good – they were around and not around and at first. And instead, the support from the youth worker at first was really important, even if we argued a lot”*

*“But Dave, he’s always been there, and even after he was arrested, I was trying to call him and he got the same number when he got a new phone when the police took his, he got a new sim card but it had the same number, because it was off the same contract. So I was calling and texting, and then he answered when I was on the way to school, and I was like, ‘what the hell’s going on?’ And he was like, ‘I can’t talk to you anymore because of my bail.’ And then I got really upset so I ended up running away, and even when he was like, ‘right,*

*this is it, we can’t talk after this call,’ the last thing he said was, ‘I will talk to you again, Jamie, I love you,’ and that was the last thing he said”.*

All the interviewees had had experiences of counselling. This was not experienced entirely as being a positive thing, or even as being supportive. Especially the beginning of such assistance was often perceived as being intrusive since the young person may not be entirely sure what to make of the abuse or the way in which it came to an end:

*“But I didn’t feel like talking about it. It was mostly after I had started talking together with the psychologist and started in a kind of group therapy – or whatever you call it.... where I told them my life story”.*

*“Yes, mum participated a bit. I found it really difficult to talk about it. I did go to some psychologist there right at the very beginning, but I couldn’t talk about it. I couldn’t talk about it. I didn’t say a word”.*

Many of the young people interviewed that had suffered sexual abuse did not feel very well, in ways that alarmed parents and teachers. Some were in some form of psychological support or treatment while the abusive contact was on-going. The fact that the expert they met with did not realise what was happening in their lives somehow crystallised their view of adult society into a place that is not ‘there for them’:

*“It feels like you have been to fairly many people who have failed to spot. I have put out little signals they haven’t worked out. Like I maybe said something they should have understood, but since they didn’t catch on you didn’t say any more and skipped the next meeting”.*

Even in the interview situation the young person may have started to dissociate, as the confusing situation concerning counselling was described:

*“No, but I guess it is to check if children aren’t feeling well. If you cut yourself there is a reason..... and then..... well, to arrange it so that you can talk. And then for parents to... and so..... yes, but if you come home with a lot of bruises.... it could.. I... but if a girl has bruises.... like I did..... in strange places.... to check specially.... well.... but... you know, nah... actually.. forget about it...”*

*“As in, look... when my parents had found out that it had happened they just said we are taking you for tests. And then I did that at the Hospital. And then they referred to the Youth unit..... I mean it’s like... a ... it’s really strange. They say it’s about stuff like this but then... most who are here have diabetes. And like are there because of their diabetes. And I just alright, OK...”*

The above extracts emphasise the complete lack of control and confusion felt by some of the young people interviewed.

## **Category Five: Others involvement**

The category of ‘Others involvement’ was made up of several codes: Being offered help; Maintaining relationships; Making it worse, and Losing control. The role of other people, be they family or professionals, was central in enabling disclosure and recovery.

### **i. Being offered help**

For anyone meeting with young people in a supporting capacity it is vital to understand what in the meeting that makes the young person feel understood, respected and listened to in a way that makes it possible to talk about and to contextualise harmful experiences. Boies, Knudson and Young (2004) have suggested that, “Sex educators and therapists who intervene with adolescents and young adults should consider how Internet usage shapes understanding of sexuality, sexual identity, and the ability to develop and maintain intimate relationships” (p 360). In the present interviews young people expressed a hope to meet a wise person who would know a lot about the online world and who would not make the young person explain too much:

*“I thought she didn’t even like me. It’s just that she never really understand the problem or see there was any problem because it wasn’t like a textbook problem, and no I don’t think she understood the internet things, or anything.....Yeah, she didn’t really understand anything, or want to understand it. Just doing her job”.*

*“She was strict by the pointer ... there was ... she didn’t understand ... I had to repeat myself several times ... and I thought it was really difficult”.*

The personality of the professional, as understood by the young person, was important. Where there was a sense of warmth in the relationship,

it was easier to connect. If that was missing, the young person found it difficult to make use of the opportunity to talk:

*“She understood that ... I could tell her what had happened to me and she understood ... I felt that finally there was a person I could trust”.*

*“She was very gentle and warm.... yes... very sweet. At first Anita told them and then I spoke some. Um... for one she arranged it so that I could remove some school subjects when I lived up there and then they found the family shelter. But otherwise we talked a fair bit about that which was... about how I felt. She also got in touch fairly often just to check since I lived by myself”.*

*“But I felt comfortable by then. It was, the impression that they gave me was warming. So that’s kind of why I thought, do you know what, I’ll give them a go”.*

Some of the respondents remarked on what they saw as ulterior motives that lay behind the professional’s wish to meet. On other occasions, the young person visited the professional just to satisfy the parents or make them stop talking:

*“Also like, I don’t know, people making money out of it, loads, as well, like you know there’s people who are like therapists, whatever, and they charge like EUR 500 a session, and they’re just making loads of money out of it. ....It wasn’t emotion based. It was like making it easier for everyone else in society based....Yeah, and she was quite young and she didn’t really...she had all the training, so she thought the training...it’s all like she’d learned it out of a textbook. ...Maybe you should talk to a person first like a normal person”.*

*“No, it wasn’t the same stuff. They had suffered but not in the same way as I ... I mean I don’t know... but I ... I just don’t want that and my parents just it is good in order to deal with what has happened. And then I went there to make them shut up so that we could stop talking about it at home and stuff”.*

At the same time young people acknowledged that assisting them must have been a difficult job since they vividly recalled their own ambivalence about whether anything might be offered that would help:

*“I don’t know really, I don’t know. I have no idea. I don’t think that I would have had the courage to do it, because I didn’t know what sort of help I could’ve received, or which sorts of persons would have been able to help me..... they tried to help me out, but I wasn’t willing to open up in this sense and so I didn’t really get all that much help, just a few words aimed at comforting me, more attention, some advice about how to be more careful, but nothing more”.*

*“I didn’t like it. Actually in a way I did need help. I kept talking but at the same time I didn’t want them to do anything about it”. [about getting help in general]*

Being offered assistance was also confusing at times. Different agencies and different professionals were involved and the transfer from one unit to another was never smooth however carefully it was explained or prepared. Listening to the young people talking about how they were first speaking to one case worker who then recommended another who later put them on a waiting list gave an impression that the assistance available to young people often seemed out of synch with their needs. At times the young person had some kind of inkling as to how the work was to be conducted, but most of the time it seems there was no collaboration with the young person, or discussions on what goals they had for the meetings.

*“And then I was on a waiting list for counselling for six weeks. And then went for that and hated it ‘cos I felt it was so patronising. A woman sat there with a clip board making notes of what I was saying and stuff, and it was just horrible”.*

Respondents were also full of praise for warm, understanding and caring professionals that slowly enabled the young person to speak about worries and fears, and that kept going even though it was tough:

*“... but she has just helped me so much, because she kept asking me about things which I felt she should just let be. But I was able to get so much off of my chest that was important to bring to light”.*

*“...that’s when I was put in touch with X Services, who I say saved my life. ‘Cos I was in such a mess. I know. But I think at the time I was so muddled with what had happened and so confused and everything, and, you know, they helped, they helped me pull my strings and straighten me up”.*

*“Yes, but the first good one was a psychologist. She made me attend the trauma group. There they were great”.*

Gudjonsson (2003: 2007) has discussed in detail how police interviews can go wrong and the potentially damaging consequences, not just for those wrongfully convicted but also on occasions preventing the apprehension of the real perpetrator, who may continue to commit serious crimes. Gudjonsson (2010) has emphasised that we need to extend our understanding of psychological vulnerability beyond learning disabilities and mental illness to include mental health and personality issues more generally. However, this is framed largely in terms of the reliability of the child or young person as a witness, rather than the impact of police interviewing on the victim. Back, Gustafsson, Larsson and Bertero

(2011), in a qualitative study of children between 9 and 15 years, found that all the children interviewed had a feeling of not being believed and what they wanted more than anything was to be participants in the legal process rather than passive objects of that process. Even though meeting the police was profoundly different from situations where professional counselling or psychological assistance was offered, the two seem to have been similarly perceived by the young people interviewed in the present study:

*“She was like, I wasn’t born yesterday, I’m not that old, and I wouldn’t know, I suppose”.*

*“Well, that’s like what it was, because two people from child protection came in, one was really nice, a little X woman, and one was this big angry man, and he came in, ‘we know you had sex, J, just let us do the swab so we can get him.’ I was like, ‘I didn’t do it,’ and I was going to cry and she just sent him out, she was lovingly saying, ‘it’s okay.’ And I hadn’t eaten anything all day, she got me some food and everything, so it was nice”.*

But dealing with the police raised a number of additional issues. Had the young person engaged in any illegal behaviour? Could they be suspected of assisting the perpetrator? Would they be believed? The issues of speaking the truth or how to keep some kind of control became important:

*“It’s hard to be...like with the police...obviously I wasn’t going to tell them the truth, and that makes it even worse because you just feel bad about lying, but then you know you have to, to cover yourself up, and the whole time you’re like, ohhh, what’s going to happen now, are they going to find out?”.*

*“In the beginning, I just didn’t care at all about anything. It was just kind of – huh. And I wouldn’t eat. I was just tired. Sleep and don’t care. And then I got angry. And when I went in for the questioning, when I was being questioned by a woman, who just kept pressing me and keeping at it – I mean, she asked me the same question ten times in a row. There I was kind of feeling, “OK, now I’ve told you four times. Now you should know that what I’m sitting here and telling you is the truth”.*

It was disappointing to young people when they felt the police could not do anything but interview them:

*“And the police just ... we can’t do anything. I said that I had his IP-number but they weren’t ... they didn’t even watch the film”.*

Some things the police did may have come out of lack of experience or training, but this perception that the police were not on their side meant that a lot of trust was lost from the outset.

*“It was really, really horrible, actually, because when the police were called, and they come in their car don’t they? They come all in their uniform. And then I remember being sat in an office and seeing the police and I was escorted by the head of sixth form down to the police. So everyone was looking to think, oh what’s he done?”*

Repeating what they had already said took a lot of effort. Not only did this mean they have to re-live the experience, it also meant having to adjust their own perceptions of what happened. The experience with the police sits in contrast to the good experiences with professionals who managed to help them make sense of what had happened:

*“I look back now and I think, the amount of times I had to re-live what happened to me within one day to then being moved to another*

*place to then be examined, which is the most horrible thing ever. ‘Cos you’ve got someone poking around, and they stick things inside you, and it was like this is the last thing I want. I know they’ve got to do it but it’s just the way it was all crammed into one day.... In the interview, oh, it was horrible, ‘cos I remember sitting in a room, it was like the room we’re in now, and it was full of cameras ‘cos with me being under 18 it had to be filmed, and all that”.*

Clearly the police interview was a situation where the young person was extremely vulnerable and where the police were making all the choices. This was clearly reflected in the many times the young people commented on the room they were in, who was present and in what way the interview was conducted:

*“Well at the time I thought they were kind of quite nasty, because with it being two men and not a woman and a man...Just, the way they spoke to you really. It was kind of like, and what was horrible, I know at the time the investigation’s just started, but it’s when they kept saying, is claiming, is claiming, he says... Yeah, because not once did they ask me how I was feeling... There was no like, no sensitivity to the questions really. It was like they’ve got a list of questions, they’ve got to ask them. And they did, and not once did they say, you know, how are you feeling? Are you okay to carry on? Do you want a break? It was just di-di-di-di-di with these questions”.*

And in a quiet way, some police were found to be good:

*“The police and my lawyer were good”.*

*“The police officer... was young. She was like good. And I... like.. when I didn’t want to say she would say it and I would agree if it was correct”.*

The strong link between young people and their parents is demonstrated again and again in the interviews. To some the relationship with parents is full of trust and mutual understanding and the way they describe their parents' responses is coloured by this and opens up new opportunities for the young person to connect emotionally:

*"... they were sad about what had happened. And I think maybe also – I don't know – whether they also were a little angry with themselves that they had let it happen.... And I really felt as though I had let him down".*

*"He came straight to the women's refuge where I was and started crying "but why haven't you said something?" "You know that we would have been there." But I said that I do know ..."*

To others there was a lot of disappointment in how their parents reacted to the sexual abuse suffered by the young person:

*"Well, I don't know if it would have helped because I think she just felt sorry for herself quite a lot of the time....She always feels like she's the one who's been hard done by, or whatever....I can't remember other than he was really angry".*

*"She [Mother] made me feel guilty. She said that it had been my fault because I had been too explicit, that I was to blame for having sought attention from other people. That it was my fault for looking for trouble".*

Most parents found it difficult to understand the events and that it had happened to their own child. This was part of the disclosure process, in the sense that for some parents it took time to adjust and to focus on assisting their child and to put their own reactions behind them:

*"Mum and dad I think, I know my mum didn't want to believe it, which is understandable 'cos I wouldn't want to think about my kid, and for quite a while mum didn't want to believe it and I just wanted to kind of put it in the back of her mind... And, I've never really spoken to my parents about how it made them feel really... Trying too hard is how I'd explain it. Fussing too much when I didn't really want fussing. And when my mum panics, well, when my mum's worried she is the worst person to be around, 'cos she's such a nag but she doesn't realise she's doing it".*

*"My parents?..... Well, they were..... I mean.... um...mmm..... dad said that he would batter them to death and mum just cried..... bro also wanted to batter them to death.... and sis... yes but she said she felt guilty".*

Families changed due to situations like these and in the interviews it was noteworthy how observant young people were about their parents and their reactions:

*"We have never spoken about difficult things like that and she has never brought it up directly either. Maybe she wants to pretend nothing is the matter as well?" [about mum].*

*"I mean it was like the worst I have ever experienced. Mum was like sitting crying and I was stood and said that it was like me who wanted to sleep with him. And that I was the one who did everything and that it was none of her business".*

Much of the support offered to young people was offered as family therapy. Parents were involved in varying degrees, which was often understood by the young people as necessary and possibly more useful to the parents:

*“... it may have been more useful for my mother than for me because I had in any case, with the passage of time, tried to detach and distance myself from thoughts of that guy and so it was more helpful with regard to our relationship than to me as an individual. It was more about what was happening between my mother and me”.*

## **ii. Managing relationships**

Peers played an important part in the life of these young people. Friends were, however, not often referred to in the interviews. Mostly friends were reported to have been upset or shocked when the disclosure was made, and at times friends clearly shied away from knowing about the abuse or talking about it:

*“And then he was really upset ... you have to move in with me ... you need someone....Yes, and he broke down and was so upset and why hadn't he seen anything. He blamed himself. “Why haven't you said anything and we have to go to the police”. Oh, he was so upset”.*

*“My best friend at the time was told about it....At first he wouldn't believe me and teased me. But after a while, he became more and more convinced – and of course it was a shock for him”.*

Friends did also in some cases play an important part in the disclosure process, supporting the young person to speak to parents or teachers about what had happened:

*“We were really close. And I told her – talked and talked and talked – uhh, what had happened in there, what had gone on. And she then told it to her mother”.*

Through much of the literature on sexual abuse in general, and on sexual abuse online in particular, there are speculations as to how young

people coming to harm experience reactions by others as being judgmental. Clearly this was an aspect discussed under the theme of making choices, since so much of staying in control is on how the young person manages to frame the experience in a way so as to maintain an inner image of being in charge. When the abuse was disclosed, personal agency was compromised and the young person was open to being judged and feeling ashamed:

*“I was so terribly ashamed of myself. I was ashamed to say that I had had sex and I was ashamed of how stupid I had been. I asked my friend to be with me and she agreed. We were both crying and my teacher was great, he understood me, he reassured me”.*

*“... because I felt so bad about what had happened. I felt very guilty at the time – that I was the one who had done something wrong. Uh, and it was – I think it was mostly because I had lied so much. And I could see how disappointed my parents and my older brother had become”.*

The feelings of having done something wrong, something they were responsible for and something they should not have done were strong in many interviews. This was projected on to professionals they meet and many of the encounters are coloured by efforts not to disclose the true circumstances or what lead to the abuse happening. Even when interviewed, some of the young people still claimed they were to blame for what had happened:

*“...yeah they were dressed in normal clothes, I think, and they asked me about things and I lied and they're like, “No, you're lying”, and I was like, “Yeah”.*

*“I felt like they didn't believe me, so it was kind of like, well why am I even here?”*

*“... I really thought it was my fault and I still think it is my fault”.*

The realisation of not being to blame enabled some respondents to feel upset about how others have reacted and the lack of support or understanding they have received:

*“I don’t know, in a way, it’s hard to make people feel like they’re not being judged for it, and it’s not a bad thing they’ve done because it’s not really their fault”.*

*“She didn’t like me because I wasn’t working class, and I wasn’t from a deprived background, and I think that was why she didn’t like me, and she made it seem like it was all my fault, and that I was like really horrible and stuff, and I bet she even knew what had happened”.*

Having to repeat what had happened was a pain that was often remarked upon in the interviews. It seemed the shame of the whole event increased with each time it had to be repeated:

*“I was still coming to terms with what had happened myself, without having to relive it over and over again, and there’s certain things that I didn’t want to say ‘cos I didn’t... I was kind of scared even to tell the police, and didn’t want to, so. I felt pressured a lot”.*

*“And then someone sat there with a clip board going, mm, yeah, oh dear. It’s like, you kind of...”*

People’s reactions were taken as proof of the bad things that they had all gone through and that they should be ashamed of what had happened:

*“... they found out and they, too, distanced themselves”.*

*“I tried to turn to a teacher, but as soon as the teacher heard that maybe...a lot of stories were going around about me, that I was pregnant by that person...when she found out I was seeing someone that old she thought I was a bad lot and distanced herself”.*

### **iii. Making it worse**

Sadly enough, for many of the young people interviewed the assistance measures added to the difficulties they were in. To some this had to do with the involvement of people they did not want to have involved in the process. To others going to meet the counsellor became an ordeal in itself, something you had to manage and that made you tense:

*“Well, after all that happened I then tried to take my life by taking an overdose ‘cos my head was just so mashed. And then, I didn’t even want to be around my family because they were told information that I kind of would have wanted to have kept to myself, for the time being”.*

*“I felt really tense and hated the whole 50 minutes of it every time I went”.*

It appeared that our respondents were driven by a strong need to reformulate the abusive experiences, and the support they looked for and received was part of this. When the support included repeating what has happened to several people, and even then not leading to any change, the process may well end up leaving them feeling worse than prior to seeking help:

*“Because following my last interview, the one that was filmed, they came to the conclusion that I was just experimenting with my sexuality, and left it as that. And then that crushed me even more, ‘cos it was like how was I experimenting my sexuality, like no means, no”.*

In the section on making choices we have scrutinised the value that young people put into keeping secrets and the role this plays in maintaining a sense of control and of agency. Keeping things to oneself remained an important strategy to maintain self-respect. In the context of receiving assistance, and in managing how others responded, secrets played a role:

*“Yeah. I didn’t want to admit it”.*

*“... there aren’t that many who are walking around with the kind of secret that I was. Or like I still have in relation to some people. It’s not an image of how when you are raped – that isn’t the kind of thing you go around talking about”.*

Some went through careful planning in order to determine when, how and who should know what was going on. A strategy that remained central for several of the interviewees:

*“In any case she said that she would send a letter to my parents. At that point we had had summer holidays. And then she told me the day before that she would send them a letter. Since it was the summer holiday I collected the post and took care of the letter”.*

#### **iv. Losing control**

When others responded, many of the choices were made for these young people. Others had a view of what was best. More people are involved than was wanted and managing the flow of information was difficult:

*“And it’s like, no, you can’t just suddenly spend every day on the computer, and then have a computer taken away from you because*

*that’s really the only thing that matters, and I was like what else are you going to do when you’re like 14, 15, at home, all evening”.*

*“I just couldn’t face going in there, really, because I was the talk of the school. People weren’t sure what had happened until my friend let slip to someone, and then it was the gossip that this has happened and that’s happened. So I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t...”.*

Losing control meant losing control of how the memories of the events affected the young person. Images came back to them in situations which were unmanageable, images that may have made it impossible to function:

*“Because I saw these images in my mind and that kind of thing. The many ... and I have cut a lot of classes afterwards, because I just couldn’t get a grip and get over there. Because I was afraid that it would happen again”.*

The process of receiving assistance, being part of a police investigation and having to disclose to a number of people they preferred not to know about the abuse took a toll on all young people interviewed. The abuse changed their relationships, their friendships and the way they used the Internet and their interactions with others:

*“I’d kind of like my old life back, to be like before, but maybe it’s better this way”.*

Throughout the interviews there was a strong ambivalence around disclosure; suspicions around talking and a wish to leave it all behind. The young person understood that speaking about the abuse was important, but at the same time they saw the risk of losing the sense of control and mastery they had managed to acquire during the time of the abusive

contact. This is often translated in the interviews into expressions of frustration at having to tell people the story and not being left alone:

*“Well I told the school, police, social services, then the police informed my mum so I kind of had to brief my mum, then my brother. So, oh and then the examiner ‘cos they needed to know where I presented and...”.*

Speed was important, just wanting to be over and done with. Receiving assistance and having others reacting to the story forced the young person to articulate things they would have preferred not to talk about:

*“... where I felt she was irritating. And I basically just wanted to get through the whole thing with the psychologists as quickly as possible”.*

*“And reason why I said that I was forced – that’s a bit of a negative word – because at that time I felt it was very negative that she just kept on going. Because it was mega-irritating”.*

Reactions against the consequences that assistance and support measures brought with them were strongly expressed:

*“I can remember that I was there a few times and was told that I had to go to court. I was really sad about that and I cried and cried and cried, because I just hated that feeling of having to sit together with strangers with big gowns and wigs, right? Like in films”.*

Choosing what to tell in which context was important in order to maintain the pretence that the young person was in control of the abusive process. Speaking to court obviously violates this in a way which speaking to the psychologist may not have.

## **Category Six: Closing the box and picking up the pieces**

All of the young people in the study had had contact with either therapeutic or support services, although there were considerable differences in what had been offered and their willingness to respond. Similarly there were differences in their bid to leave things behind and move on. This category was made up of: ‘Making sense of what happened’; ‘Maintaining control’; ‘Colluding and respecting’; and ‘Moving on’.

### **i. Making sense of what happened**

For some young people there was a move from thinking that what had happened was not a problem, to appraising the context as being problematic. Simon, Feiring and McElroy (2010) have suggested that the need to make meaning of child sexual abuse is common and persists after the abuse ends. Context in this sense might be the Internet platform, or it may relate to feelings for the offender.

*“I went back on that chat line recently, and went on it to see if there was interesting people to talk to, and none of them are interesting. They’re all like perverts”.*

*“And it’s been good. I can feel that now. Because now it all feels – it feels like what happened was natural... Of course what happened was wrong. But it’s something that I can look back on without feeling mega-badly about it. And I also think it had to do with – that it had to do with the fact that I liked him.”.*

For those young people where there had been a single sexual assault, it appeared that there was an ability to isolate the experience, and see it as a discrete event rather than something far more pervasive.

*“I can’t change the past. I can only change my future. And it shouldn’t – my future shouldn’t be based on the things that have happened...”*

*I have to be able to think about it. I must not hide it or bury it... I have been able to think about it, and I have been able to be sad once in a while. But it can't control my life" .*

Where there had been multiple abusive situations this appeared not to be quite so straightforward:

*"Yes... I do know it isn't my fault... but that isn't how I feel always. The different things are a bit different. The rapes I know... that I have no part in at all... but with the ones I got in touch with myself it is something else".*

What this young person seems to be struggling with is the feeling of responsibility in that she saw herself initiating some of the sexual contacts. This is echoed by other respondents:

*"I don't know but there are many who ask why I even went there. The thing is though that once I had started it was difficult to break off. It didn't mean you wanted to just because you went there yourself".*

## **ii. Maintaining control**

The issue of control is central to this analysis and permeates all of the categories: using the Internet to gain control; feeling in control; seeing things spiral out of control, and resolutely trying to maintain control, by limiting the impact of events or controlling who should know about them. In relation to 'Closing the box and picking up the pieces' there was a lot of discussion about the right to keep things private:

*"I'm afraid of how people will look at me afterwards. Even though it was not necessarily me who did anything wrong. But that isn't just*

*a risk that I feel like taking. I don't feel as though my friends need to know about it. So I can't see any reason why they should".*

*"As in it's not good but... it's not something I want to talk to anybody about these days either. We have a lot of contact, my sister and I. We are in touch virtually every day, but nothing about what happened..."*

*"But I don't want to have it spread around the entire town so that everybody knows about it and everything. It's only to people I trust"*

The issue of trust, in terms of who was to know about what happened, is an interesting one. Trusting someone clearly influenced whom it was possible to talk to, but in some cases it wasn't sufficient:

*"He doesn't. And it's not because I don't trust him. I'm only going to be there for two or three months – or however long it is – and he doesn't have to know about it".*

In this case 'not needing to know' seemed in part to reflect how this might impact negatively on her relationship with this person should a disclosure be made.

## **iii. Colluding or respecting?**

Throughout the analysis it was noted that there were many times where an attempt had been made by the respondents to tell people, both peers and significant adults, about what was happening or had happened. At times this was not articulated through words but by a change in behaviour:

*"My teachers did say that I had become quiet and stopped working in class. That I mostly sat looking out the window. There were*

*a few... there were a couple who took me aside and asked... how things were and what happened. But they let it go since I said that there was nothing the matter...".*

*"No, my parents didn't suspect anything. I said I was going to friends' place and that. But they started thinking... as in they did notice that something was wrong when I started laying off the handball... that was maybe after six months".*

This young person was convinced that, "I think people saw me but didn't dare do anything. They didn't dare ask". This sense of ambivalence about whether or not someone should have asked more or should have acted can be seen in the following:

*"I mean, I didn't say anything but then it became clearer that I was not meant to say anything to anybody".*

In some ways this reflects the findings of the survey of professionals in Germany (Von Weiler, Haardt-Becker & Schulte, 2010) who felt very unsure what to ask should they suspect that there were problems in relation to the Internet, and maybe more importantly, a lack of confidence about what they should do if a disclosure was made. However, for many of the young people interviewed it was emphasised that if concern had been expressed and others followed up on their feelings that 'something was wrong' this might have encouraged disclosure and could also have influenced the impact of the abuse:

*"I think that if somebody had said that, 'I can see that you feel bad, that there's something that's really tough'... maybe I would have said something".*

*"... because... if... A little girl came to me and told me, I would never promise to keep quiet. I would... I would contact someone... social services perhaps... so that at least something happens".*

*"Well, they [the parents] think the same as I do today – that it was wrong of him to trick a 12-year-old boy into doing that kind of thing. And not a curious child who had gone along with it".*

The positioning of the young person as a child in need of protection is a challenge, especially given the clear articulation by some young people about the right and need for sexual agency. It also has resonances with some of the discussion by Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell and Ybarra (2010) about the similarity of many of these grooming cases with what, in the United States, would be described as statutory rape: "The participation of underage youths, while generally deemed voluntary, is voluntary in varying degrees. Some victims are pressured to engage in sex, and some are intimidated... Compared with adults and even youths in their late teens (ages 17 to 19), younger adolescents have little experience with intimate relationships or romance... They often lack the ability to negotiate effectively with partners about sexual activity... adolescents with older partners have high rates of coerced intercourse..." (p 17).

#### **iv. Moving on**

The complexities of 'moving on', and what this might actually mean, indicated considerable diversity across this group of young people, from those who saw what happened as an experience in life that reflected who they were at that time, to others who saw it blighting the possibility of there being anything for them in the future:

*" And I don't think about it as something dangerous. I just think about it as though it was one of the things I've experienced as part of life. I don't think that it has an impact on me anymore".*

*“... it has been a really big help for us to discover that I’m good enough. That I’m OK... And that I’m not different from all of the others... I’m still different... but it’s OK to be different”*

*“Yeah, you have the self-confidence not to do it”.*

*“I don’t know. I don’t see a future”.*

In part this reflected some of the consequences of the abusive online contacts, with some young people now ‘looked after’ by others, some having missed out on their education, and others repeatedly going back online to engage sexually with others or to sell sex. It was apparent that for some there was still considerable emotional distress, accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame:

*“I was self-confident and now when this all happened, I got really depressed and it’s still present in my life now. It’s when things get really stressful... that I also somewhat fall into a hope and then mentally feel very unstable and sensitive. It’s simply the case that I have to fight depression every day and if I can’t fully get a handle on myself, then I fall into a hole and get really depressed again”.*

*“... and I was ashamed. I thought I was disgusting. And like then... I mean I don’t know”.*

*“It feels worthless, difficult... mostly. I like start crying... I mean I remember all the times I have had sex and all the times I have been filmed. I remember most of it”.*

These feelings impacted on the ability for some young people to see the possibility of relationships, especially romantic or sexual ones:

*“... impossible. I’ll never be able to be in a relationship... And no...*

*um... it, well... won’t... I mean, it would never work”.*

*“It made me realize that not all people have good intentions and above all I learned to not necessarily trust people who seemingly want to help you”.*

*“” As in I have got a good connection with the other girls in the shelter. But I don’t know... about my future... I can’t have a partner or children”.*

It also changed to some extent how they now related to others online:

*“I’m more careful now, but obviously certain types of people are constantly trying to introduce themselves, and I often distance myself... but there’s never anything that goes beyond just a simple chat online”.*

*“Well if someone wrote to me such things today, I would knock him down”.*

For most of the young people this reflected a heightened sense of caution as to how they use the Internet:

*“ Now I use it only for Facebook – that’s about it really. And when I have to research something for school”.*

*“Well... I don’t use the Internet much. It used to be more... um... but I am on The Diary [a social networking site] and stuff...”.*

*“If that doesn’t work, simply stop responding and if it’s really too extreme – fortunately that only happened to me once – then you can also ignore the person, at least on the Team-Ulm website [social networking site] where you can block the user, you can definitely do that”.*

However, for some of our respondents there was still evidence of risk taking, especially in relationship to men wanting sex:

*“There are like two sides for me. One is Facebook and my friends and then there is the other side too... with a lot of men.”*

However, while for the majority of the respondents there had been changes in the way that the Internet was used, or the frequency of online activities, it was still clearly embedded in everyday life, particularly in the context of social activities. In this context it was of interest that the Internet was also seen as a potential place to get not only safety messages across to young people, but also as a medium through which support could be offered.

*“And if there was more of that out there where, apart from you feel like you have to go on all these really explicit websites to find your sexuality, you can go on these and speak to someone. Or even if there was a way of speaking to people your own age that are going through the same thing, so you can prompt ideas off each other, but in a safe place”.*

What was emphasized was that scaring young people, or giving messages that lacked credibility, was not a way forward:

*“Not scaring you like, “yeah, that’s paedophiles” because I think that if anybody had gone, ‘Yeah there’s paedophiles on the Internet’ you expect to see them like, they expect you to know that they’re like an old man”.*

## Discussion: Towards a Tentative Model

Figure One represents a first attempt to generate a theoretical model and reflects the fact that for the young people in the study being connected afforded opportunities to address important aspects of their lives. The Discussion of each of the categories within the model revolves around issues that are central to adolescence: psychosocial autonomy; a sense of self, and a sense of sexuality (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). For all our respondents their lives and, in particular, their social relationships, were in part mediated through technology. This is similar to the findings of

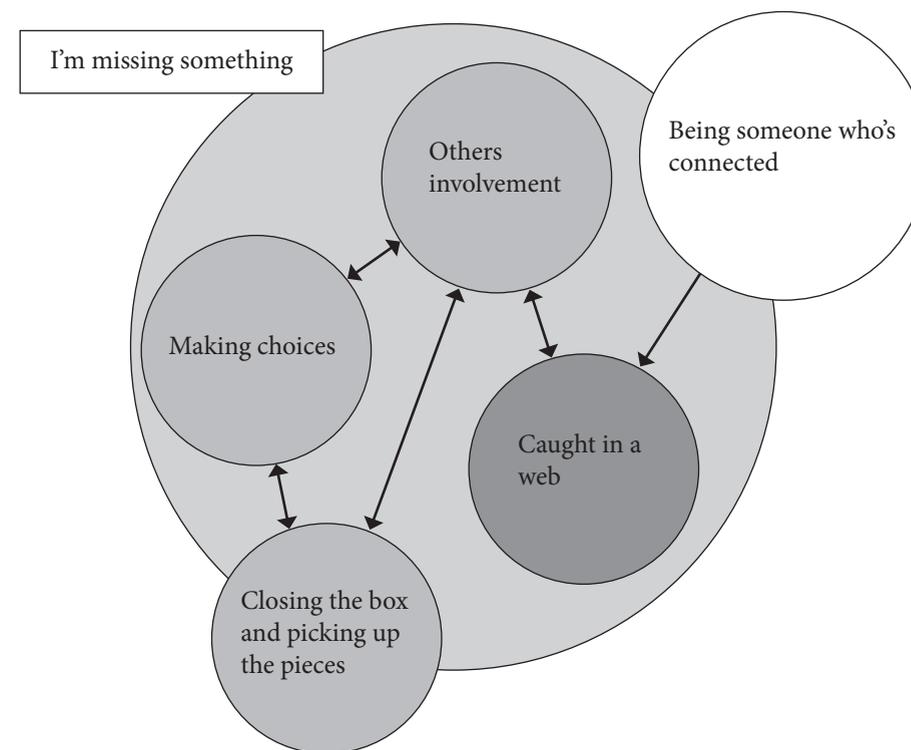


Figure One: A tentative model of online behaviour related to sexual abuse.

Reich, Subrahmanyam and Espinoza (2012) whose survey data of adolescents suggested that the most common online activities for their participants were social in nature and often involved online interactions with people known from offline contexts. Similarly Livingstone (2008), in the context of SNS (Social Networking Site) users, described how posts and messages provided a way of staying constantly connected with peers.

The young people in the present study were not passive in their engagement with others, but actively pursued contacts, and in some instances communicated around sexual matters with online contacts. This online-only-communication seems different to many of the reports of other young people's experiences, where more physically present sociality was associated with commonly reported activities, such as using Facebook, email or chat (e.g. Waite, 2011). This, in part, seemed to relate in the present study to respondents searching online for ways of meeting needs that could not easily be achieved in their offline world. It is clear from the analysis that this reflected disparate needs, contexts and histories, but being online offered the opportunity for agency: to be in control. One implication of this is that the use of such media served a purpose for these young people that cannot be construed simply as passive media consumption, in the same way that we might have thought about, for example, viewing television.

Other research has attempted to look at the purposes of Internet use for young people, although this is often examined in terms of how problematic its use is. For example, Wang, Luo, Luo, Gao and Kong (2012) examined the effect of Internet use on adolescents' lifestyles through two questionnaires: the Adolescent Lifestyle Scale (which they developed) and an Internet usage scale. Their respondents were asked (amongst other things) to indicate the primary purpose of their Internet use. They were given seven options: fun seeking; sociability; information seeking;

learning; catharsis; school related tasks, and others. There is no definition given in the research as to the meaning of catharsis, but most commonly it is taken to mean a purging of intense feelings (often negative) (Bushman, 2002). Wang et al., (2012) found that catharsis, as a primary purpose for Internet use, negatively predicted healthy sleep habits and poorer quality of interpersonal relationships. The authors speculated that 'anonymous catharsis' via the Internet might be an optional coping strategy for some young people. The use of the Internet as a way of coping has been explored in numerous studies with both adults (e.g. Reeves, 2000, in the context of HIV positive respondents) and adolescents (e.g. Seepersad, 2004, in relation to loneliness, and Gencer & Koc, 2012 in the context of negative feelings). However, there is speculation as to whether such use results in sustained emotional change. Subrahmanyam and Lim (2007) found that adolescents, who felt that their relationships with online partners was one that they could turn to in times of need, were in fact more lonely.

Within the present study the wish and need for control was evidenced by all respondents. Being in control was often synonymous with feeling safe and self-confident. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) have suggested that the preference for online communication by adolescents over face-to-face communication, particularly in relation to topics that might be embarrassing or shaming, may relate to the enhanced perception of controllability of self-presentation and self-disclosure. They conclude that the features of online communication that encourage its use include controllability, anonymity, asynchronisation and accessibility. There is some disagreement within the literature whether socially anxious and lonely adolescents turn to the Internet more often (e.g. Bonetti, Campbell & Gilmore, 2010) but consensus that they strongly value the controllability of online communication.

Much of the research on adolescents' use of the Internet has examined the relationships between individual characteristics of adolescents and certain activities on the Internet. For example, Beebe, Asche, Harrison and Quinlan (2004) examined heightened vulnerability and increased risk-taking among adolescent chat room users. Their survey suggested that for both girls and boys use of chat rooms was associated with psychological distress, a difficult living environment, and a higher likelihood of risky behaviours. However, the majority of chat room users in this study did not report any serious problems. Similarly, Sengupta and Chaudhuri (2011) examined the risk of online harassment in Social Networking Sites (SNS). They concluded that certain activities by young people, including uploading pictures of themselves, disclosing personal information such as the name of their school or home telephone number, flirting with unknown people and privately accessing the Internet were all associated with stranger contacts online. Clearly these behaviours were evidenced by the young people within the present study and may, in part, have reflected their confidence about being in control of the situation, and also their ability to exclude others, including parents, who might have challenged them.

All of the young people in our sample identified themselves, or at times were identified by other people, as having experienced contacts with others online that ultimately became problematic. However, the sexual nature of these contacts appeared, at least initially, to be reciprocal. For some respondents they already saw themselves as being sexually active, and for all, including the younger ones, there was a curiosity about what might happen, and the opportunities that the Internet afforded. Sundar and Bellur (2010) have suggested that the notion of affordance permeates almost all aspects of the Internet and expands our traditional ideas about media use. The interactivity of the Internet for these young people enhanced their involvement with the content. Sundar (2008) has suggested that this reflects an "agentic perspective" where, with high levels

of interactivity, these young people were vested in the power and the opportunity to switch from being a receiver to being a sender. This in part is reflected in not only in exchanges of text content, but also practices that related to image production and sharing.

Paradoxically, this also was equated ultimately to feelings of loss of control, of things being out of hand and ultimately to experiences of betrayal, abuse or violence. When the young person felt that they had control over interactions with contacts, these are described as being highly rewarding and charged with positive emotions. Many of the relationships that later turned abusive were from their onset fuelled by this strong sense of control which was, by the young people interviewed, described as emotional. The relief and joy of having found a person to relate closely to, a person that understood the situation of the young person and was available to them, was perceived by the respondents as offering a way out of a life that seemed to lack things that were important to them. The respondents' accounts revealed how perpetrators managed, in the initial contact, to convey promises of closeness accompanied by the possibility of something exciting. The receptiveness of the young person to what was offered by the suspect was clearly evident and was responded to. Many factual explanations were given for the respondents' desire to make contact with new people, longing for something new to happen or the urge to become more visible. These included sadness since their parents were divorced; feeling slightly out-of-sync with friends at school, and being left on their own by parents they felt did not have time to be with them.

The ability to communicate with others in privacy was strongly associated with the young person feeling that they were making the choices, and reinforced feelings of control and independence, very often reflected by increased frequency of exchanges and an intensification of the relationship. This is also marked by movement to different Internet platforms,

as well as exchanges of mobile text messages and calls. For some of our respondents this was accompanied by unease and hesitation. What is clearly asked of the young person at this stage by the perpetrator is to bring the contact over from the relative anonymity of the Internet into areas that are closer to home and into routine activities that the young person is not used to keeping secret. It would be wrong to describe such keeping of secrets as new to these adolescents. Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer and Meeus (2010) have argued that mastering the art of secrecy may facilitate in adolescence a need for privacy, independence and autonomy from others. However, having secrets from parents in order to gain independence has to be balanced with a need to stay connected. Having secrets has also been associated with poorer parent-child relationships, acceptance and involvement. This longitudinal study of Dutch adolescents (Keijsers et al., 2010), found that secrecy from parents increased during middle-adolescence and was faster in boys than in girls. It may be that in the present study the burden of keeping secrets was felt more keenly in younger respondents but also the act of keeping secrets reflected perceptions of poorer relationships with parents.

What was being kept secret was usually online contact with someone whose motives were often suspected or known to be sexual. In the category “caught in the web” these contacts often needed to be framed as normal by the young person in order to justify and maintain them. The issue of normality was often discussed without actual reference to the fact that the other person might have been a young adult, but was clearly older than the young person. On one occasion explicit reference was made to the fact that the respondent felt that the relationship would have been seen as normal, outside of the fact that the young person was 11 and the perpetrator was eight years older. While there was some evidence of deception on the part of the perpetrators, for the majority of the young people in this study there was a sense that engagement with the individual who sexually assaulted them was sexual and that it may result

in sexual activity. This was both exciting and confusing and was often framed as romantic. Wolak et al., (2008) have noted that Internet-initiated sex crimes that are seen as romantic by the young people involved typically take place in isolation and secrecy, without the knowledge of peers or significant adults, and may develop with more self-disclosure and intensity than face-to-face relationships. They also note that the feelings generated may be particularly powerful and challenging to the young person. In the present sample, moving towards this engagement seemed to involve suspension of earlier caution and an unwillingness to see this particular situation as risky. However, the need for control, so central to this study, resulted for all respondents in a loss of control.

Keeping a relationship secret was for many of the young people in this study seen as not as taxing, or as painful, as telling lies. The relationship between disclosure, keeping secrets and lying appears to be complex. Cumsille, Darling and Martínez (2010) in their examination of adolescent patterns of disclosure called this ‘shading the truth’. The increasing frequency of contact and its move to mobile communication and face-to-face meetings necessitated lies about his or her whereabouts or about the times spent on the phone. This was a sacrifice respondents needed to make in order to maintain the contact and appeared to be exploited by the perpetrator. This scenario is not new and has been documented in much earlier research on the sexual abuse of children and young people, and the enforcement of secrets as part of making them accessories to the sexual acts (see Burgess & Holmstrom, 1978). For some respondents, but not all, the ultimate loss of control related to the sexual activity with the perpetrator, which was described in a variety of ways, from being violent and humiliating to something that “wasn’t very nice”. What was also different across respondents was whether the sexual activity was discrete, taking place on only one occasion, or whether it lasted over a period of time. There were also issues of agency. As part of our sampling we included young people who had gone online in order to be able to

get money for sexual activities, and their accounts of these sexual acts also included a spectrum of sexual experiences, which were perceived as being both negative and positive.

All of the young people interviewed in this study were identified because the abuse had been disclosed. As was discussed in the analysis of the interviews, disclosure for most was a difficult process, was not direct and did not include the significant adults in these young peoples' lives. Priebe and Svedin (2008) examined the disclosure of sexual abuse in a representative sample of Swedish adolescents. They described the complexity of disclosure and that the most likely recipients of disclosure were other young people of their own age, rather than to professionals. What was of interest within the present study was that disclosure to family members was more likely in younger participants, and where there was a sense of being able to trust others with the information. Barriers to disclosure have been identified in other research and include fears of what might happen if the young person told about the abuse (Alaggia, 2005) or a perceived lack of support by parents (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007). Schaeffer, Leventhal and Asnes (2011) in their qualitative study of disclosure found that barriers included: threats made by the perpetrator; fears that something bad might happen; lack of opportunity; lack of understanding, and having a relationship with the perpetrator. Within the current study all of these were discussed by respondents, and influenced the decision to disclose, the timing of the disclosure and the amount the young person was prepared to disclose. What also complicated disclosure was the presence of photographic evidence, which served to undermine feelings of being in control of the disclosure. For some respondents this loss of control was most acutely felt in relation to the actions of others, who made choices about the disclosure and its consequences, leaving many of these young people feeling excluded and shamed.

Paradoxically, some of the issues faced by these young people after disclosure raised for them similar concerns as those that led them into the sexual contact in the first place: the relationships with family and friends have to be renegotiated often leading to a struggle around who should know what has happened and also leading to a fear that the aspects of their lives they tried to change, or the void the online contact was to fill, would again open. This loss of control was seen as far reaching and for some blighted the possibility of any future resolution.

The accounts were not all negative. They highlighted the importance of others (usually adults and often parents) needing to talk to young people, to persist in asking questions and being open to discussions, and to be observant. It is important not to over simplify what helped these young people, but what they emphasised was understanding, warmth and a willingness to offer quiet support throughout what seemed at times a frightening and confusing process, at a pace that they could cope with. In some ways it seems ironic that for many of our respondents the only way that they could maintain a sense of control was to limit the information they were prepared to give. None of these young people described themselves as 'victims'. Facer (2012), in her bid to reframe the debate about child safety online has asked for recognition of the fact that it is unhelpful to see children as only innocent, vulnerable and biddable and that we need to confront the reality of children's sexuality and exploration of risk. In recognising the limitations of parental oversight there is a need for us to accept that young people seek agency through their use of technology and that we need to move away from models of control and protection of young people to consider what it means for them to be active participants and the power and consequences that such participation brings.

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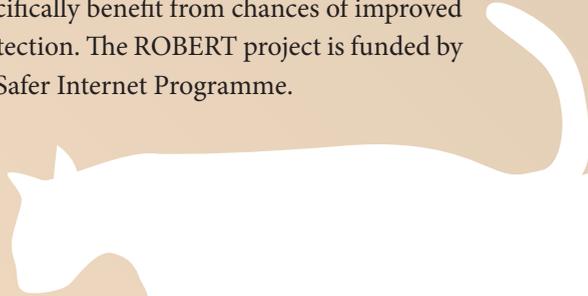
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RISKTAKING ONLINE BEHAVIOUR  
EMPOWERMENT THROUGH  
RESEARCH AND TRAINING



# ROBERT

ROBERT project intends to make online interaction safe for children and young people. This will be achieved through learning from experiences of online abuse processes and factors that make young people vulnerable as well as those that offer protection. Perpetrators' strategies in relation to grooming of children online will also be explored along with developing an understanding of how abuse may develop in the online environment. Children and young people will be empowered in order for them to better protect themselves online. Groups of children perceived to be more at risk will specifically benefit from chances of improved self-protection. The ROBERT project is funded by the EU Safer Internet Programme.



Kingston University London



Linköping University



Save the Children  
Italia ONLUS



Save the Children  
Denmark

