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The sexual exploitation and abuse of deaf and disabled children online

This intelligence briefing acts as a situational analysis of current perspectives and evidence on the sexual exploitation and abuse of children with disabilities online. It was compiled by DeafKidz International working in partnership with WePROTECT Global Alliance and Childhood USA.

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WORLD CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION
FOUNDED BY H.M. QUEEN SILVIA OF SWEDEN

Summary and recommendations

- All deaf and disabled children have a right to stay safe from abuse including online abuse and exploitation

- Children with disabilities should have full access to safety and protection programmes that allow them to stay safe online

- There is a significant gap in the data on the sexual exploitation and abuse of disabled children online which means that it is currently not possible to accurately know the level of incidence or prevalence. Specific and dedicated research that engages the wider disability community is required

- The global child safeguarding and protection community is currently not responsive enough to the needs of children with disabilities

- The stigma and taboo that surrounds abuse, especially in the global south, adds additional barriers which make it difficult for children with disabilities to disclose experience of abuse

- Child safeguarding and protection professionals should receive specialist disability awareness training – they should be briefed on the differing types of impairments and how to cater for different access and communications needs

- Particular attention should be paid to safeguarding and protection needs of girls with disabilities – a group especially vulnerable to online abuse

- Child protection teams should include Sign Language Interpreters (SLIs) and other specialist aids to communication / engagement so that children with disabilities can be supported when they disclose online abuse

Disability, child rights and disabled children's online experiences

1. Figures vary but it has been said that a quarter of the global population experience some form of disability. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that approximately 15% of the world's population is living with a disabling condition with this figure rising to 20% in low resource and developmental settings (WHO, 2015)[1].

   The additional risks and vulnerabilities of children and young people with disabilities to sexual abuse online is an intersectional concern that members of WePROTECT Global Alliance (the Alliance) must consider.

2. The term 'disability' will mean different things to different people. See **endnote** on the use of language in this paper. Perceptions and attitudes will vary dependent upon one's individual experience of disability, on culture, socio-economic factors and geography. Perceptions may be positive or negative. Invariably, a negative attitude will focus on differences and will often lead the child with a disability to feel a sense of 'shame', 'embarrassment' and 'dismissal'. These negative emotions can make the child with a disability further vulnerable to abuse as they seek to redress their shame by 'pleasing' those that show an interest in them.

3. There are a number of models of disability including the Medical Model of Disability and the International Classification of Functioning, Disability & Health (ICF)[2]. WePROTECT Global Alliance, DeafKidz International and the wider disability community subscribe to the Social Model of Disability. This model accepts that the disability – whether it be deafness, vision impairment / low vision, physical disability, a learning disability, a communication disorder or a disabling mental health issue – itself is not the obstacle, but rather, it is society and the environment within which the individual lives that creates the obstacles and disables the individual. Hence it is inaccessibility to buildings, difficulties in accessing transport, a lack of awareness of sign language or use of sign language interpreters that create the obstacles. Not the disability itself.

   Through reduction and elimination of the barriers and access to assistive devices such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, glasses and through, for example - the use of braille or sign language or other communication methods - disabled people can fully exercise their rights and freedoms, as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2008), and access services such as health, education, employment and leisure. There are, however and as might be expected, significant challenges to securing this access. Globally, people with disabilities struggle to access the services described due to poor disability awareness and a failure to include their respective access needs in service design. In addition to challenges of access, many people with disabilities experience suspicion, stigma and discrimination. In some communities, disability being seen as the price to be paid for some misdemeanour committed in a previous life. This, regrettably, can lead to the abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities with the ill-treatment they receive being 'legitimised' by differing cultures and beliefs. Disabled children are particularly vulnerable to this community-condoned abuse with negative attitudes seemingly empowering perpetrators to conduct physical, sexual and emotional abuse at will. This abuse extends to online environments through cyber-bullying, sexting, grooming and livestreaming of child sexual abuse.

4. International human rights and child protection legislation, in particular, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), notably Goal 16.2 (End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children) affirms that all deaf and disabled children have a right to stay safe from abuse including online abuse and exploitation.

5. Westcott & Jones (1999)[3] cite three factors which further contribute to the vulnerability of children with disabilities. Namely, the dependency of disabled children on carers which may often involve intimate activities such as toileting and bathing; the issue of 'institutionalised' residential care where children are subject to 'rules' and 'regulations' which require them to comply with instructions; the matter of

1 – WHO global disability action plan 2014-2021. Better health for all people with disability. World Health Organization. ISBN 978 92 4 150961 9

2 – https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/classification/icf/drafticfpracticalmanual2.pdf?sfvrsn=8a214b01_4

3 – Westcott HL, Jones DPH. 199. Annotation: the abuse of disabled children. Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry 40: 497 - 506

communication where children are unable to articulate their needs or fears. This is a particular issue for deaf children or those with communication disorders who may not have the communication skills, language and vocabulary to self-advocate and self-represent; to say 'no' to unwanted contact or to disclose abuse they may have experienced. This is compounded by a widespread lack of access to sex education which means disabled children often lack sexual awareness and so they are not able to describe body parts or sexual activity. This can lead to situations where the abuse – which may be online - remains undisclosed and undetected.

6. Having determined that there is a vulnerability to abuse, what is the incidence? There is currently very little published empirical data on the abuse of disabled children. However, data from the United States (Crosse et al, 1993)[4] indicates that children with disabilities were 1.7 times as likely to abused as

children without disabilities. DeafKidz International's evidence is that 50% of deaf boys and girls are sexually abused before adulthood compared to 25% of hearing females and 10% hearing males (Sullivan et al, 1987)[5]. In the global south in particular, child protection systems are often underdeveloped and so the recording of abuse is extremely poor or in some cases non-existent. This situation can be exacerbated by a lack of developed socio legal infrastructures – clinical, social welfare and criminal justice – which means that perpetrators remain undetected and victims unsupported.

7. It is estimated that at any one time, 750,000 individuals worldwide are estimated to be looking to connect with children for sexual purposes (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2019), this will undoubtable include children with disabilities.

4 – Crosse, S., Kaye, E., Ratnofsky, A. (1992). A report on the maltreatment of children with disabilities. Washington, DC: Westat.

5 – Sullivan, P. M., Vernon, M., & Scanlan, J. M. (1987). Sexual abuse of deaf youth. American Annals of the Deaf, 132(4), 256-262.

Risk and vulnerability to sexual abuse online

Risk is a complex and subjective matter, the reasons why a particular child with a disability is at risk and vulnerable to physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect will vary from child to child. But in the instance of the online-facilitated sexual abuse of children with disabilities, DeafKidz International's experience suggests there are a number of key factors that contribute to vulnerability including:

1. Poverty

Children and young people with disabilities are often the poorest and most neglected members of society. In families fractured by the need to survive, placing a child online to perform a sex act for a stranger half way around the other side of the world is a means to an end.

2. Extensive time spent online

Across the world, many exhausted parents and care givers seeking to respond to the needs of a child with a disability, especially if they have additional complex needs or if they exhibit challenging behaviour, will understandably utilise technology devises to keep a child occupied. Unsupervised, the child will roam online and be prey to those seeking to access children.

3. Lack of education and awareness

Children with disabilities are often denied access to education because they are deemed incapable of learning or because they are 'not worthy of schooling'. Denied access to life skills and sex education, many children with

disabilities will not realise that they are viewing harmful material or that they are being groomed or livestreamed. This is both complicated and compounded by the stigma that surrounds disability and sex. Some parents may not wish their child to access such education and others may fear that sexuality education will promote and increase sexual behaviour. However, given that young people with disabilities are often as experienced as their non-disabled peers (Wazakili, Mpofu & Devlieger, 2009)[6], access to sex education, including safe internet usage is essential.

Indeed, one area of risk is that where young people with disabilities turn to the web to experiment sexually because they have no-where else to go. Often experiencing little affection and sometimes not understanding sexual norms, they experiment online and it is here that they can be especially vulnerable to online sexual advances that are both inappropriate and dangerous.

6 –.M Wazakili , R Mpofu, P Devlieger Should issues of sexuality and HIV and AIDS be a rehabilitation concern? The voices of young South Africans with physical disabilities Disabil Rehabil, 2009;31(1):32-41.

4. Gender

Evidence suggests more girls than boys appear to be harmed online, although boys are beginning to feature more often in child abuse images online (Muir, 2005)[7].

UNICEF's 2012 Technical report *Child Safety Online: Global Challenges and Strategies*[8] states the following 'In terms of age, evidence suggests that adolescents are most at risk, particularly adolescent girls'. This, of course, will include girls living with disability.

5. Loneliness and isolation arising from disability

Shunned by their peers, viewed with suspicion and 'other', many children with disabilities live lonely lives. Desperate to be 'liked', wanted, and accepted, they often turn online. Children with low-esteem, craving attention and wishing to please will respond readily to those who show an interest in them on social media or through other digital means and there are those who specifically target children with disabilities to satisfy their sexual needs. Often in networks sharing images, fantasies and, regrettably, streaming the children they have managed to manipulate. For some abusers, including adults with disabilities, the trading of abusive material featuring children with disabilities is a commercial proposition.

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7 – Muir, Deborah, 'Violence against Children in Cyberspace: A contribution to the United Nations Study on Violence against Children), ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2005, p. 9, available at: www.ecpat.net/ei/Publications/ICT/ Cyberspace_ENG.pdf

8 – https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/652-child-safety-online-global-challenges-and-strategies-technical-report. html, Innocenti Publications, 2010

6. The failure of the global child protection community to adequately protect children with disabilities

Data detailing the incidence and scale of the online-facilitated sexual abuse of children with disabilities is glaringly absent. Child protection networks often fail to include the protection needs of children with disabilities in their strategic planning and operational implementation. This is particularly evident when it comes to ensuring online safeguarding and protection work is inclusive of disabled children's needs. With more than 800 million children online and based on the WHO's proportional estimates, more than 120 million children with disabilities are digitally active. Accordingly, any activity seeking to safeguard and protect children online cannot succeed without actively including the needs of children with disabilities. There needs to be attitudinal, systemic and procedural shift by decision makers and influencers that sees the disability community consulted and engaged, so that disabled children can be safe and protected when online.

Reducing risk and vulnerability

1. There is an urgent need to develop a coherent and integrated global response to the risk and vulnerability of children with disabilities to abuse and exploitation online. With regard to the specific needs of deaf children, DeafKidz International's response is essentially three-fold. Drawing reference from international human rights and child protection legislation, in particular, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), notably Goal 16.2 (End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children) DeafKidz International seeks to work with local deaf partner organisations and other civil society stakeholders to;

a. Empower deaf children and young people to recognise online abuse and to, therefore, reduce their vulnerability to such abuse;

b. Ensure governments, civil society decision makers, including child protection practitioners are able to safeguard and protect deaf children; to respond to the clinical, social welfare and criminal justice needs of deaf survivors of abuse online;

c. Ensure deaf children and their families have equal access to communication, health (including ear and hearing health care), education and economic opportunities through which they are able to realise their rights to be safe from online abuse whilst maximising their potential to achieve.

2. Utilising this approach as a 'line of departure', there is a clearly a need for an approach and perspective that works to reduce the risk and vulnerability of all children with disabilities, irrespective of the disability type and which also supports the parents / caregivers of these children. It is essential that the parents / caregivers of children with disabilities are aware of the requirement for their children to safe from online abuse and for them to support them when disclosure occurs. For parents who may already be traumatised through stigma by their child's disability, this can be especially difficult. All of this requires the global child protection community to adopt universal design principles and make 'reasonable' adjustments to existing and future online safeguarding and protection provision so that children with disabilities can access the guidance and practice within. This could include;

   a. Engagement with the disability community and disability organisations when planning and designing programmes aimed at reducing the risk to online abuse. This to ensure an authentic and robust disability input that validates resultant design and implementation.

   b. Work to adapt existing safety programmes so that they are accessible for children with disabilities – eg. content in Sign Language for deaf children, visually enhanced content for children living with vision impairment / low vision, adjusted literacy content for children with learning disabilities etc.

   c. Specific training for professionals working with children with disabilities so that they are better able to recognise and respond appropriately to signs of online abuse.

   d. The use of disability role models to act as peer to peer demonstrators within the disability community through which safe behaviours are cascaded – how to respond to cyber-bullying, how to recognise the dangers of sexting etc.

   e. Engagement with technology providers to ensure mechanisms for blocking and preventing the illegal and exploitive material, live streaming and online grooming are applicable / compatible with speech and Braille access technologies used by children with disabilities – eg. JAWS, NVDA and VoiceOver.

   f. Specific training for those working in victim response – clinical, social welfare, criminal justice professionals, so that they are disability aware – eg: how to work with Sign Language Interpreters, how to ensure interview spaces are accessible for those with a motor disability, how to affirm understanding when supporting a child with a learning disability etc.

3. The development of criminal justice procedures which are accessible for children with disabilities and their parents whilst also reducing the risk of secondary abuse – eg. further exposure to the perpetrator and, thereby, additional fear, trauma and shame. For example, police interview procedures and court house processes that protect the child including the use of video relay Sign Language Interpreters, the use of court advocates able to support children with a learning disability, recorded and accessible cross-examination.

Engendering change

Effectively responding to the risk and vulnerability of children with disabilities to sexual exploitation and abuse online requires a seismic attitudinal change. This would allow the global child protection community work to include the needs of children with disabilities in its doctrinal thinking, service design, programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

WePROTECT Global Alliance will work with its members to further a strategic commitment to the safety and protection of all disabled children.

Endnote on language: there are a variety of terms and words to describe disability which people across different communities and countries prefer to use. To reflect and accommodate these, this paper uses a combination of the terms 'disabled children', 'children with disabilities' and 'deaf and disabled children'. WePROTECT Global Alliance and Deafkidz International both use wording which aligns with the social model of disability.