



Child 'self-generated' sexual material online:

Children and young people's perspectives

Briefing paper

CONDUCTED BY

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The purpose of our research

We listened to children and young people's views on the issue of 'self-generated' sexual material in three different country contexts – Ghana, Thailand and Ireland to understand how children feel about the issue of 'self-generated' sexual material and how they feel they might be better supported. We deliberately chose diverse locations for this research to understand how this impacts children's online experiences.

This research comprised qualitative data gathering in the form of small focus groups with children aged 13-17 in the three countries (Ghana, Ireland and Thailand) to discuss and explore the issue. The children were divided into different groups according to age (with separate sessions for 13-15-year-olds and 16-17-year-olds) and gender with girls and boys engaged with separately. We spoke to 97 children in Ghana, 73 children in Thailand and 42 children in Ireland and a total of 17 professionals across the three countries. We encouraged them to share their general thoughts about how and why 'self-generated' sexual materials were shared, their views on responses to this issue and their ideas on how this could be improved. We also conducted a literature review of research on child 'self-generated' sexual material, as well as a targeted review of research and policy in all three countries.

In this research we define the term 'self-generated'¹ sexual material as including a broad span of images or videos from voluntarily 'self-generated' material that is usually shared between adolescent peers (where harm is typically caused when imagery is reshared against a young person's wishes) to coerced 'self-generated' sexual material – which includes grooming, pressure, or manipulation to share material.² Although this study was primarily designed to explore the sharing of voluntarily 'self-generated' material among groups of teenagers in schools rather than focusing specifically on children known to have experienced coercion – the study allowed scope for children to express their views about all of the behaviours included within this definition.

¹ We use adverted commas when using this term to recognise that although this term reflects the current policy consensus around how to refer to this kind of phenomenon and the material it generates, it is not a definition that is universally used or understood by either professionals or children.

² A more detailed definition of these terms can be found in our literature review in section in our full report

Summary of key findings

The children in all three countries had a lot to say about the impact of 'self-generated' sexual material on children, as well as the changes they wanted. Below are some of the identified shared themes in conjunction with findings that were specific to the individual countries and contexts.

1. Children expressed that the creation and sharing of 'self-generated' sexual material among children and young people is common with gender playing a key role in experiences.

In Ghana, Ireland and Thailand, children described the sharing and receiving of 'self-generated' images as relatively common. The receiving and viewing of sexual content (images and video) when online was considered routine. Many of the children perceived the practice of creating and sharing 'self-generated' sexual material to be common among their peers. The children talked with greater familiarity about the sharing of sexual images than they talked about sharing video content, but they were familiar with both. It was clear that children were highly aware of the issues in all three locations, and that it shaped their understanding of online norms.

It was clear from the discussions that girls are seen to be disproportionately affected by the negative consequences of 'self-generated' sexual material and this gender difference came up particularly strongly in our conversations in Thailand and Ireland. These conversations suggested that girls were placed under greater pressure to get involved, and more likely to be judged whether they participated or not.

"Girls can get a name and boys don't. Girls get called a slut, guys get a pat on the back for it. It's happening a lot." Girl, 16, Ireland



2. Children described a range of motivations for engaging in 'self-generated' sexual material, from excitement and connection to pressure, coercion, and financial exploitation. Children's evident concern about a range of the negative experiences and consequences came through clearly in the data.

Children tended to focus on the less positive motivations and reasons for sharing 'self-generated' material.³ This was not universal - one female respondent in Thailand explained to us that it was "not as bad as you think it is, it's about what happens to the images that is bad" - arguing it is the leaking of images and associated shaming that was damaging not the adolescent sexual interest or sexuality or body confidence that 'sexting' itself expresses. There were also gender differences: boys in Thailand and Ireland talked about it in a way that suggested an element of enjoyment and excitement.

3. The children described a complex mix of motivations and drivers including pressure and expectations in relationships, the influence of social media, and a desire for affirmation and self-esteem.

Many children and young people understood the risks of onward sharing but felt that it was normal to engage in it anyway. When asked why this was, the concept of unwanted pressure came through strongly and consistently, with some seeing this framing of expectations to send an image as part of a relationship commitment as a "toxic" but common aspect of relationships. Some children shared that it could be difficult for children to resist these kinds of pressures and expectations which were shaped both by interpersonal relationships but also by broader media culture and social norms (e.g. children in Thailand highlighting pressure to conform in peer groups). We also heard that many children were motivated to share because they wanted or needed to feel validated.

"I know girls who want to feel good about themselves. They post sexy pictures on sites... like TikTok and Instagram because they want people to say they are beautiful." Girl, 16, Ghana

4. Children, especially girls, expressed that the content and architecture of social media environments drives and facilitates the creation and sharing of 'self-generated' sexual material.

We heard from children and young people about the influences and expectations created by social media content. The girls in Ireland talked about the media set up of the way a

³ In the research, we spoke to children in small same-sex groups rather than individually and this may have contributed to some of the negative framing that we heard from children. The stigma that we learned about that attached to 'self-generated' material may have made some children reluctant to speak about the positives, even when asked, in small groups with peers.

person should look and a normalisation of trying to achieve and share an idealised look in return for positive feedback. The girls in Thailand also talked about how, for them, there was a prevalent expectation coming from their immersion in social media that they would be objectified, rated on their looks, and sexualised. Sending images in this context was partly seen to be about trying to live up to these expectations and representations of being normal and successful online.

“There is pressure to be seen as attractive and to meet expectations. There is a view that you are valued for your body these days - especially in the media - you’re either a whore or a housewife.” Girl, 16, Thailand

The children and young people also talked about the affordances and ease of sharing images and how this led to image sharing getting out of hand. Young people referred to ‘fast’ technology which precluded thinking or judgement time before sending an image. Young people in Ireland talked about the ease of creating vast networks through adding friends of friends, and girls talked about routinely receiving unwanted sexual material from strangers or from bots.

5. In Ghana children talked about sharing of images in relationships which showed many similarities to Thailand and Ireland, but the main reason they thought children engaged in sharing ‘self-generated’ sexual material was because they were exploited for money.

In Ghana, the motivation to sell indecent images for money was perceived as overwhelming for many poorer children in both the city and rural schools. This subject dominated the conversation from the outset, the main reason that children and young people came up with and kept returning to. The selling of images for money to ‘white foreign men’ and to local men was described as commonplace and children and young people told us that the most important response to ‘sexting’ in Ghana was to address poverty and the lack of economic opportunities. The children indicated that in some cases parents even encouraged children to send ‘self-generated’ sexual material too in order to bring money into the household. This account that children gave of commercial sexual exploitation of children as commonplace was also confirmed by the professionals in this study who described this as a significant issue facing their schools and communities in Ghana. The professionals said they struggled to get social workers and police to engage.

“There are people who give these pictures to men or boys in their community for money. We are very poor here so if someone offers money, girls will want to say yes.” Girl, 15, Ghana

6. There is widespread shame and stigma around ‘self-generated’ sexual material when this is known to have been shared. This appears to partly be linked to a cultural divide between the norms and expectations children encounter online and the traditional cultures of their offline lives.

Much of the testimony of the children and young people we spoke to reflects a clash between their online experiences and the conservative values and attitudes that were still prevalent in their offline social lives. Adults were seen as having little understanding or interest in their online lives. Across all the locations of the research, the shame and stigma of having an image shared and having been known to share an image was felt to be significant despite the normalisation of sexual content in their online lives. In Ghana, for example, professionals reported that the stigma around this issue was related to a strong and conservative set of traditional religious values in which the moral behaviour of children is seen to impact on the social standing of the family and sex before marriage is discouraged. The children themselves conveyed a strong sense that they were trying to navigate and make sense of this cultural divide, largely unsupported by adults around them.

“I do not think that any adult in Ghana would understand why a child would send a sexual picture to someone. They would definitely blame the child and punish them. Most adults are very judgemental here.” Girl, 14, Ghana

7. Children felt that the shame and stigma relating to self-generated sexual material was unhelpful and needs to change. They felt it creates barriers to help seeking and contributes to bullying and poor mental health outcomes.

The children were concerned about the ways in which stigma and shame created barriers to the help that children needed particularly when images are leaked.⁴ Children in Ghana and Thailand talked about the impact shame and related bullying could have on mental health, and in all three counties they mentioned the potential for self-harm and suicide as a consequence of shame and isolation.

“Thai society and Asian parenting may make it tough for young people to tell anyone. They don’t talk about these things, and they don’t want to disappoint their parents.” Girl, 15, Thailand

⁴ They also felt it was unfair that the blame should attach to the person whose images were sent and shared rather than the person who had leaked the material or pressured them to send it.

"This issue can cause mental health issues, stress and anxiety, even suicide. Suicide in Thailand has been an issue in the past caused by stress and anxiety." Boy, 17, Thailand

"Your life would be miserable once people know what you have done...There will be too much shame and you would not cope." Boy, 16, Ghana

8. Children felt they could not or would not report to the police or seek help from the police, due to both the specific risks of criminalisation as well as a general fear that the police would be hostile and make their situation worse.

The children and young people relayed that they would be extremely unlikely to seek support from the police for this issue. One reason for this was the legal position with children aware of the risks of being criminalised for sharing 'self-generated' sexual content in Thailand and Ghana. The children in Thailand in particular were very aware that they could be criminalised even if they were a victim of exploitation due to the strict laws on explicit content, and this meant that any police involvement risked escalating the issues and making them worse. The children disagreed with this legal position and saw it as unhelpful, disproportionate, and wrong.

"We are afraid of consequences of reporting to the police because in Thailand, it's illegal to send any nude photo. There was a case last year of some boys being arrested for sending a video but also the girl in the video was arrested which is really unfair. In [dealings with the police] it's not about who is in the wrong, it's who has the most money." Boy, 16, Thailand

It was also striking that across all three countries the children viewed the police as not being capable or trustworthy in such cases and that they were hostile to children. They felt that the police would dismiss their accounts and blame them even in situations where they were the victims. Suggestions were made by some children including wanting sections of the police that were accessible, 'child friendly' and which could communicate supportively with children.

"The Garda⁵ needs to just stop stereotyping young people, particularly young boys. If we go to them for help, they just accuse us of lying or assume we have done something wrong." Boy, 14, Ireland

⁵ The Garda Síochána, often referred to as the Gardaí or "the Guards", is the national police service of Ireland.

9. Children want, but do not currently have access to, confidential support when it comes to dealing with issues relating to 'self-generated' sexual material. This is particularly the case where children have lost control of their material and want support.

Linked to the above all children wanted to get advice and guidance from adults without the risks of negative consequences and blame. Children wanted somewhere to go where they could get support from adults and where their information would be kept confidential but where they could benefit from advice and guidance.

Across all three countries, the children were sceptical about reporting to school counselling services, safeguarding leads, hotlines or other adults due to concerns about confidentiality. They feared that reporting would in various ways make life worse, either through increasing the exposure of the images, increasing knowledge of what they had done and their exposure to shame (and their family's shame) or because they would be blamed and punished.

"Many adults in authority are not discreet in Ghana. They will tell others who you are and what you have done." Girl, 14, Ghana

10. Children report a significant generational divide between themselves and their parents in relation to internet use.

The children and young people in all three countries described a generational divide between themselves and their parents/guardians and said that their parents generally lacked an understanding of their online lives. Discussions in Ghana and in Thailand with children and professionals suggested significant structural barriers to parental or carer involvement in their children's digital lives – in particular family poverty and needing to work long hours. The idea that parents and carers can and should shape and guide their children's online lives may be a socially and culturally specific one in so far as it requires parents and children to have sufficient shared leisure time alongside shared perspectives and technical understanding to share and discuss online experiences. In Ghana and Thailand, the issues were not only structural but cultural too with traditional values and approaches to parenting also creating barriers to digital parenting.

In Ireland the barriers between children and parents were less structural than cultural and generational differences, linked mainly to differences in technology understanding and use. However, children not feeling able to turn to their parents or carers was a common element across all three countries. Many of the children in this would have liked to turn to their parents and carers for support and guidance but felt the gap in understanding was too substantial for them to do so.

"Because of the age gap, this generation wouldn't understand. Thai parents tend to be older, so they don't get it." Boy, 13, Thailand

"They [our parents] need to think about what it's really like for kids in our generation growing up online. They need to put themselves in our shoes. They need to be calmer and listen to us." Boy, 13, Ireland

11. Children wanted better information and education from schools to deal with 'self-generated' sexual material as well as improved online safety and sex and relationships education more generally.

The children across all three counties wanted better education and support on these issues from their schools. They felt that a more appropriate, up to date, and responsive education in schools would help them understand and navigate issues of online safety - including the sharing of sexual material. In all locations the children appeared to have rapport with their teachers and felt safe in school contexts and wanted education to be provided in school settings. However, schools were seen as currently overwhelmingly academically focused and any education about online safety that was currently received in schools was seen as generic and not specific enough to current issues such as 'sexting' with some children reporting they had received no education on online safety at all. Those that did receive education in schools described the content as largely out of date or irrelevant. They did not see this as something they could use to navigate the challenges they faced online.

"For the school programme we don't get education on this - but in our class the teacher printed out some information on being safe online and it was printed out and put at the front of our classroom so that we can read it." Girl, 14, Thailand

The children described wanting more informed education but delivered in a way that also gave them the opportunities to talk through a range of real-life scenarios in groups and benefit from advice from peers who were facing similar situations or pressures.

"Young people, educating each other informally could really help, in a space that allows for conversation. The gender of groups should be the same so children can speak openly." Boy, 16, Thailand

12. The absence of education in schools means that children are learning about sexual issues from social media or in some cases from pornography.

For most of the children across all three countries the lack of education and information about these issues in schools and the lack of advice and guidance from adults meant that the information gap was filled by social media. Most of the children we spoke to told us that they sought information about these topics directly from online influencers. They told us that they followed creators who created relevant content directly about these topics. Whilst this can clearly be a useful source of information for children there is no quality control for this information or balance between this and what they are receiving offline. Alongside social media influencers some of the children in Ireland in particular spoke about being influenced by and learning from pornography.

"It's so easy to look at pornographic pictures and we are so used to seeing them on websites. We see porn and feel we need to set the same standards and want to copy it." Boy, 13 Ireland

13. A number of boys' groups expressed feeling particularly isolated as they felt it was less culturally acceptable for them as boys to talk with their peers about feelings and emotions.

In Ireland and Thailand, it was identified that boys felt particularly isolated in dealing with online pressures as their peer culture made them less able to talk about the impact of emotions, feelings, and expectations than girls. Girls were identified as better able to support one another and girls raised this difference between themselves and the boys too. Boys also relayed feeling negatively stereotyped and dismissed, but also unsupported.

"Schools don't really talk to us about this. We have wellbeing lessons, but they only talk about things vaguely. You don't really get a chance to discuss this issue. They just tell us but don't allow us to talk about it." Boy, 13, Ireland

14. Children felt that technology companies can provide useful resources for them, but also that they should do more to manage content and behaviour on their services.

The children and young people in all three countries felt that technology companies could do more to support them with these issues. They explained that they currently relied on online platforms for learning as well as advice and information on social issues and that they currently turn to apps and platforms to get information. The children talked about having more creators specifically paid to provide educational videos and information that they could seek out online and which they could trust. They wanted this for themselves

and some also felt that targeted online information could be useful for their parents too.

"The companies like Facebook, TikTok and Instagram should run education videos for children and also their parents, we would listen to them." Girl, 15, Ghana

The children and young people emphasised that they wanted platforms to do more to reduce risks and the spread of 'self-generated' sexual material, and to deal with offenders making unwanted advances or sending sexual content. They felt improved technical measures should be used to help find and remove self-generated sexual content. The children in Ireland particularly emphasised the importance of the rapid identification and removal of images from online environments, as well as age verification and restricting the access to adult pornography.

"You could ban porn on platforms, make it more difficult to send images (so you make it so that people can't upload explicit images)." Boy, 13, Ireland

15. The language of 'self-generated' sexual material is not used by children and is generally unhelpful.

None of the children and young people in this project used the phrase 'self-generated' sexual material. They used terms such as 'sexy selfies', 'sexting', 'nudes' or 'sexy photos' to encompass 'self-generated' sexual material. The language of 'self-generated' material was broadly understood by the professionals we spoke with once the definitions were shared but overall did not appear to support the effective framing of these issues. The way in which 'self-generated' covers both aspects of child sexual exploitation and consensual sharing between peers creates difficulty in the breadth of different dynamics it is trying to cover in one term. It was pointed out that in many of the exploitative and coercive contexts, especially where older adult perpetrators are involved the material was not truly 'self-generated' and a different term altogether would be more appropriate.



Recommendations

Although the fieldwork for this research was conducted in Ghana, Thailand, and Ireland, there are clear implications for the global response to the issue of 'self-generated' sexual material. The recommendations below derive from direct suggestions from children in this study and are based on their key messages. In our recommendations we have sought to identify the actions that would help to realise the changes that children wanted.

Improved education

1. Governments and school authorities should review their educational responses to these issues in the light of the key findings above and consider whether their approach is likely to meet the needs that children have outlined in this study.

We found that children wanted modern and responsive educational interventions to address this issue including specific lessons in schools that addressed this subject, and for their teachers to be trained and equipped to deliver education on this topic alongside other aspects of online safety education. In relation to educational input from schools they also wanted:

- Educational interventions that are realistic to their digital lives, and which acknowledge the complexities and pressures of the scenarios that they face online.
- Interventions that were discussion based rather than purely instructional.
- The opportunity to receive educational input from other children who had faced the similar issues and pressures.

Non-judgemental support

2. Governments should make provisions to educate and inform parents and carers.

We found that children wanted more support and understanding from their parents and carers and to be able to seek their help on these issues. They wanted educational initiatives to target parents and carers to improve their understanding of the pressures in their digital lives and information that would enable them to be a source of support and help. In line with the complexities of the parenting relationships articulated in our findings - approaches to this issue may benefit from inclusion within broad ranging parental support programmes.

3. Governments and civil society organisations should seek to increase public awareness that encountering these issues online is commonplace for children.

Children felt that this would help to counter the extent of shame and stigma in relation to these issues and mean that adults are better able to support them. We found that children wanted the opportunities to talk safely to adults about issues facing them online including 'self-generated' sexual material.

4. Governments, schools and civil society organisations should provide children with confidential support from trained adults where they could get advice and guidance when things have gone wrong without blame or making their situation worse.

Children wanted to know what was likely to happen to their information when they reported and currently lacked confidence that there would be discretion, consistency or understanding from adults to whom they reported. This suggests the need for clear and consistent best practice guidance for professionals including law enforcement social workers and educators on 'self-generated' sexual material so that responses are standardised and reliable and children know what will happen to their information. These responses should also promote access to confidential support.

Structural and institutional change

5. Legal reforms are needed that ensure that children are not criminalised for the possession or sharing of their own images either where they are a victim, or where they were engaging in in a normal and consensual way with another child or young person.

Children told us that criminal sanctions were unhelpful, disproportionate and wrong and acted as a barrier to seeking help.

6. Governments and those working in the criminal justice system should consider how to ensure children have opportunities to engage with the police as victims or witnesses without encountering scepticism, judgement or blame.

Children recounted their hostility to the police and made clear that they would not turn to the police, for fear of being blamed, shamed, or criminalised. Children told us that they wanted an improved police responses that was supportive and sympathetic. Some children suggested a specialist section of the police service focused on, or available to children.

7. Governments should prioritise tackling sexual exploitation of children and their images/videos.

The children in Ghana wanted their government to do more to tackle sexual exploitation

faced by children in Ghana and it was clear that they felt some children in their community were trapped in this situation due to poverty. Approaches should align with the multi sectoral approach of the National Model Response⁶ and include education and support for children facing this situation, targeted intervention with their families, support services for children and support from the child protection workforce as well as law enforcement action pursuing successful investigations and convictions.

Technology companies

8. Technology companies should do more to support children on this issue, including providing high quality information from online influencers and educators from whom they are currently seeking help.

Relevant apps and platforms could consider sponsoring content (created by experts and children) that gives children information about how to respond to concerns around 'self-generated' sexual material.

9. Technology companies should invest in technical solutions to respond to the circulation of 'self-generated' sexual material.

Children told us that they wanted social media companies to do more to prevent the sharing and circulation of self-generated images using technical solutions and controls on their platforms, for example, tools that enable anonymous removal of material such as Report Remove in the UK⁷ and the 'Take it Down' service set up by NCMEC.⁸

Language

10. Relevant and effective language should be used when talking about 'self-generated' sexual material online.

This study found that the term 'self-generated' sexual material was not understood or utilised by children themselves, or their educators. Any resources aimed at children on the topic of online safety should be presented in terms that have relevance to children. A review of the term 'self-generated' sexual material should also be conducted for practitioners, given not all content is 'generated' or shared consensually.

⁶ <https://www.weprotect.org/model-national-response/>

⁷ <https://www.iwf.org.uk/our-technology/report-remove/> This is a partnership between the NSPCC, the IWF and YOTI to support young people to get their sexual images or material removed from the internet if they know they have been shared.

⁸ <https://takeitdown.ncmec.org/> - this service hosted by NCMEC allows under 18s anywhere in the world to apply to have sexual images removed from participating platforms.