



Red Barnet

**EVERYDAY PICTURES OF CHILDREN
IN **SEXUALIZING** CONTEXT
2020**

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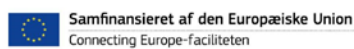
The article is written by Red Barnet Denmark as part of the knowledge sharing that is in INHOPE, The International Civil Network for reports on Child Sexual Abuse Material to which Red Barnet is a part.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2019, a case pops up on YouTube. A YouTuber has found what he calls a wormhole. He starts by typing 'bikini haul' in the search box, 'haul' referring to a type of YouTube video, where YouTubers typically showcase clothing or a new thing they have bought. After just two clicks through suggested videos, he passes through the worm hole: All of the videos that YouTube now recommends for him are videos with girls aged 8-12. Among the comments below the videos are timestamps, which take you to specific points in the videos where the girls have momentarily spread their legs or are in some other kind of compromising position. The sheer number of these timestamps, the manner in which YouTube suggests countless videos and the sexualization of the children motivate the YouTuber to sound the alarm. His findings are shared on a broad range of media – also in Denmark. And they have consequences. On 21 August 2019, YouTube adopts new guidelines for how videos may (and may not) be shared on their platform (Google, 2019). Videos featuring children where timestamps are added would today be removed from YouTube, and it is now impossible to comment on many videos featuring children. Social media giants Facebook and Instagram have also been busy tightening up what they allow on their platforms. This is all something that raises more questions than answers. Because blocking the content on a couple of individual platforms does not solve the problem. It just moves it. Which leaves questions such as: How widespread is this phenomenon? Where does it come from? Where has it now moved to? How can we protect children from being sexualized on the Internet? These are the questions we have worked to answer with this report. Before we get that far, however, we must answer a basic question: Why are timestamps on videos featuring children a problem? The answer is found in the Child Rights Convention.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Article 34 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is about sexual exploitation. This article states that children have the right to protection from sexual exploitation (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1992). Specifying times in a video where the child is in compromising positions changes the context of the video. An innocent video featuring a child jumping on a trampoline suddenly becomes something sexual. The sexualization of a child will always be involuntary. It is irrelevant whether the child wants the sexualization or whether they feel violated by it. A child under the age of sexual consent can never provide consent to engage in a sexual activity with an adult or to participate in a sexual context. We therefore believe that the act of inserting a child in a sexual context or sexualizing a context featuring a child constitutes the sexual exploitation of the child and a violation of Article 34. Children are currently poorly protected in this area. Through out this report "children" refers to people under the age of 18 just like the definition of a child in the Right of the Child, article 1.

It is natural to raise questions as to whether it can have consequences for a child if they are unaware that their images are included in sexualizing contexts on the Internet. This might be somewhat reminiscent of Bishop Berkeley's (2014) question about whether a tree falling in a forest makes a sound if nobody is around to hear it. However, there is nothing paradoxical about putting everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts. Doing so represents a serious violation of the children and it is an inappropriate step for those who want to look for the documented sexual abuse of children. It is a gross violation of a child's right to be protected from being made a sexual object. Whether or not the child knows

about the sexualization does not change whether they should be protected from it. It is the child's right. And it is our responsibility as a society.

Protecting children is at the top of the agenda at Save the Children Denmark. This report is dedicated to this purpose. The report unfolds how we, in our protection work against the sexual abuse of children, identify tendencies and mechanisms that point not only to increased awareness and lack of protection but also to the need for more concrete initiatives.

One of our own initiatives that has helped raise awareness of the tendency to sexualize everyday images and videos of children on the Internet has been our *ReportIt* (AnmeldDet) hotline. The following section describes the purpose and function of the hotline.

SAVE THE CHILDREN DENMARK HOTLINE

The Danish hotline was established in 2001. From the very beginning, the purpose has been clear: To fight the documented sexual abuse of children. A classic divide for an NGO that is striving to protect children is to draw a distinction between national and international efforts. But when it comes to combating documented child sexual abuse, the question of national and international efforts is not a matter of one *or* the other, but always the one and the other. In the struggle against the documented sexual abuse of children, it has therefore been important for the Danish hotline to have a strong element of cooperation – nationally as well as internationally.

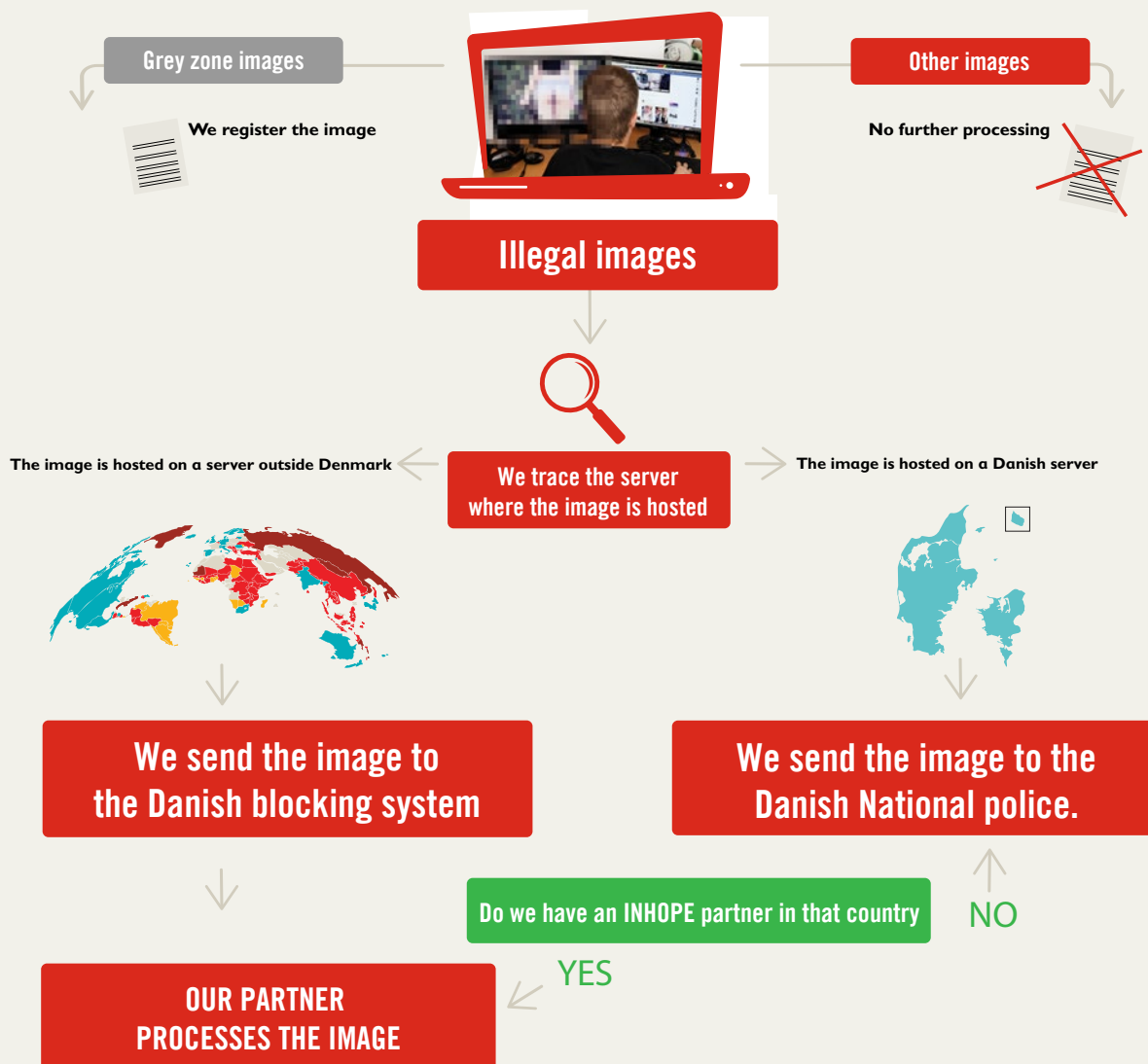
On the national level, we are currently working closely together with the Danish police and, in particular, NC3 – the National Cyber Crime Center – the unit working with online safety and protection. This collaboration has been of great importance in the fight against the documented sexual abuse of children and has been crucial in major cases, including the so-called 'Umbrella Case', in which more than 1000 Danish youth were charged with sharing a documented sexual assault. We also work together with the Danish telecommunications industry and the Danish offices of social media multinationals. This work is all focused on quickly and effectively removing abuse material from the Internet and supporting the investigation work.

Internationally, the Danish hotline is part of a worldwide network of 'civilian' hotlines that are assembled in the organization INHOPE. Via INHOPE, we work closely together with Interpol. In practice, the ICCAM database, which houses the abuse material that is reported to the hotline, is directly linked to the Interpol ICSE database (International Child Sexual Exploitation).

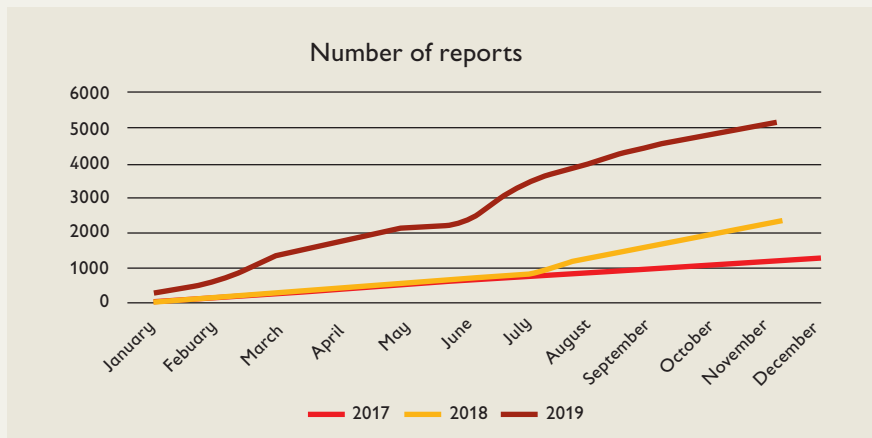
The daily operations of the hotline function as follows: We receive (usually anonymously) a report from a concerned citizen. The report contains a URL of where the notifier suspects that there is documented child sexual abuse. Analysts working for Save the Children Denmark have undergone specialized training under INHOPE and directly with Interpol, and they assess the character of the reported material. In the case of materials that are not deemed illegal (e.g., adult pornography), the notification is not processed any further. If the site or material on the site represents a new tendency or is relevant in relation to the protection of children (e.g., everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts), the

material is registered for the purpose of strengthening the protection of children. This is reinforced, among other things, by articles describing the digital abuse to which children are exposed. If the reported material is illegal, then the location of the material is traced. If the material is on a Danish server or there is talk of material featuring Danish children, the notification is passed directly on to the National Police. If the material is located on a foreign server, the notification is forwarded to our INHOPE-partner in that country, and the URL address is sent to the police, in accordance with the Danish blocking scheme. This process is illustrated in the figure below:

OUR EXPERTS EXAMINE THE IMAGE



We would like to be able to report that, year by year, we receive reports of fewer and fewer abuse materials featuring children – indication that the Internet is being cleaned up. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As knowledge of the hotline’s work increases and the hotline has developed better tools to deal with and register the abuse materials, the number of reports has increased in recent years. In 2019, the Danish hotline received a record number of reports.



In the first half of 2019, more material was reported to the hotline than in all of 2017 and 2018 combined. This increase is not unique to Denmark, as it has been a general tendency for hotlines around the world.

Many factors contribute to such a significant increase, but one of the conclusions that this increase helps to emphasize is that stronger efforts must be invested in preventive measures. This article argues that these preventive efforts should include measures aimed at protecting children from being put into sexualizing contexts. Because even if much of the increase can be attributed to directly illegal material, we have seen in the same period how everyday images of children are grossly sexualized. And while there is a clear procedure for how to deal with abuse images, everyday pictures of children in sexualized contexts land in a vacuum where there is no proper protection of the children. These sites often contain legal adult pornography, where ordinary images of children are inserted alongside the pornography. Neither the image of the children nor the pornographic images are inherently illegal. According to the current legislation, context is not sufficient for a site to be illegal – it must be directly illegal material.

The big losers of this lack of child protection are the children themselves. They are the ones who are placed in a context that they have never asked for and over which they have no power. But it is equally important to point out that this lack of child protection leaves everyone as losers. The person who is looking for websites where children are involved in sexualized contexts can potentially have their limits pushed with respect to what is acceptable with respect to children. We know that 1% of all men have sexual thoughts about children (Seto, 2013). Whether this is a congenital pedophile sexuality or an expression of something else, there is no need to have online environments that push the boundaries for whether it is okay to have children in contexts involving sexual activity. This exposes children to gross, unwanted sexualization and can potentially affect what one thinks of as being appropriate for children. While this is an early phase in the search for child sexual abuse, it is a crucial phase in which stronger child protection can be decisive.

CATEGORIZING THE SEXUAL CONTENT OF PICTURES

In the analysis of the reports received by the hotline, we can categorize the reported materials in terms of the degree of sexual content. Here, we assess both the degree of the sexual content in the material itself and the degree of sexualization of the context in which the material is used online. In our work, we see how all types of images can be used to stimulate sexual thoughts among adults about children. Context is therefore crucial for whether we perceive a video or picture as sexualizing.

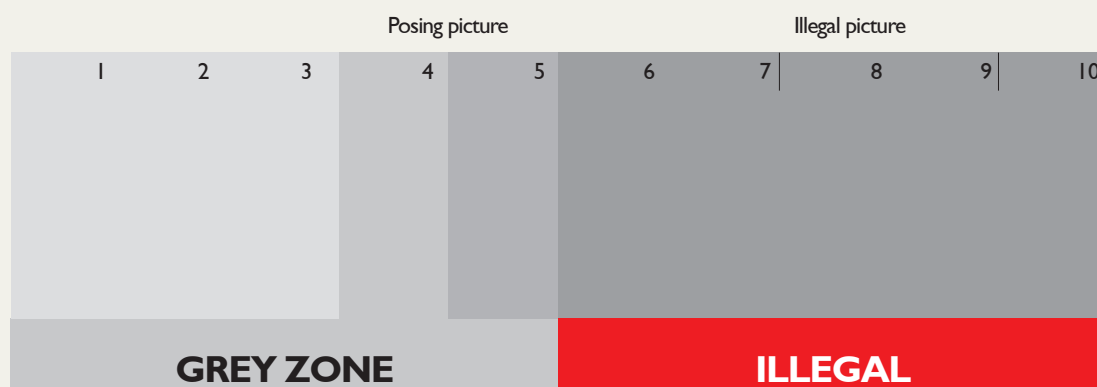
Save the Children Denmark has previously developed a scheme to illustrate distinctions in the sexual content of images featuring children (Pihl, Jakobsen & Sørensen, 2014). This categorization is based on empirical analyses carried out by researchers Max Taylor and Ethel Quayle (2003) of the sexual exploitation of children in video and picture materials. In the scheme, presented below, images featuring children are categorized on a scale from 1-10, depending on the degree of the sexual content of the image.

Categorizing the sexual content of images featuring children

Level	Designation	Description of the content of the images
1	Ordinary	Ordinary pictures featuring children playing in neutral surroundings or non-erotic and non-sexualized images of children in underwear, swimwear and the like from advertisements or family photos.
2	Nudist/art	Pictures of naked or partially naked children in ordinary nudist contexts and from legal sources. Also artistically justified pictures including children.
3	Voyeur	Surreptitiously taken photographs of children in playgrounds or other surroundings intended for children. Such pictures typically feature visible underwear and/or varying degrees of undress
4	Posing	Deliberately posed pictures of children, fully or partially clothed or naked.
5	Erotic posing	Deliberately posed pictures with fully or partially clothed or naked children in erotically charged, sexualized or sexually challenging positions.
6	Overtly erotic posing	Pictures highlighting the genital areas, where the child is either naked or fully or partially clothed.
7	Overtly sexual activity	Pictures featuring touching, mutual masturbation, masturbation, oral sex or sexual intercourse with children but without adult participation.
8	Assault	Pictures of children, who are subjected to sexual abuse, where bodies are being touched by hand, involving an adult.
9	Gross Assault	Pictures of gross sexual abuse containing sexual activities involving sexual intercourse, masturbation or oral sex and featuring adult participation.
10	Sadistic/bestiality	<p>a) Pictures with sexual content showing a child being tied up, beaten or whipped or otherwise subjected to acts causing pain to the child.</p> <p>b) Pictures in which an animal is involved in some form of sexual activity with a child.</p>

For an in-depth consideration of the categories in Danish, see 'Billeder i Gråzonen' Pihl, Jakobsen & Sørensen (2014)

On the background of inspiration from Taylor and Quayle's 10 categories about the sexual content of images of children, Save the Children Denmark has developed the following model (Pihl, Jakobsen & Sørensen, 2014). The model illustrates which categories of images are considered illegal according to Danish law and which categories are in a legal grey zone.



According to the model above, images featuring children in categories 6-10 are illegal in Denmark. The aforementioned table on page 8 illustrates how the images in these categories are all characterized by a child's genitals being clearly in focus and/or that they feature a child being subjected to a sexual activity, either alone or together with others. These are the only types of pictures that are considered illegal to produce, possess and distribute.

In the period 1 January to 31 December 2019, the Save the Children Denmark hotline received 5251 reports of documented online sexual abuse of children. Of them, 1353 related to reports of illegal material, corresponding to 26% of the total reports. This is the highest percentage of illegal material that has been identified in the history of the Danish hotline thus far. The statistics also show, however, that up to 74% of the reports concern images that are not themselves illegal. Many of these reports deal instead with grey zone images.

GREY ZONE IMAGES

'Grey zone images' is a term that covers videos and images of children, which in and of themselves might often seem non-sexual but which are imported into an online context intended to stimulate sexual thoughts among adults about children. Grey zone images thus become a sexualization of the child(ren) featured in the images.

As the model above indicates, many different types of images can be labelled grey zone images. The model generally distinguishes between deliberately posed pictures of children and more common, non-arranged pictures of children. Posed pictures are characterized by being staged, the child deliberately posing in front of a camera and often displaying indications of being instructed in how to pose. The child's smile, for example, may seem strained and artificial, and their posture may appear unnatural and forced. Posed pictures can be anything from a school portrait photo to a child posing in gym clothes to a child who is naked or dressed up in erotically charged clothing and makeup and who is posing in sexually challenging positions (Pihl, Jakobsen & Sørensen, 2014).

The production and online distribution of posed pictures of children has been specifically investigated in a Save the Children Denmark report from 2014 entitled *Billeder i Gråzonen* (Pictures in the grey zone). The report in hand instead focuses on the tendency according to which ordinary, everyday pictures of children are placed in a sexualizing context online.

EVERYDAY PICTURES OF CHILDREN IN A SEXUALIZING CONTEXT

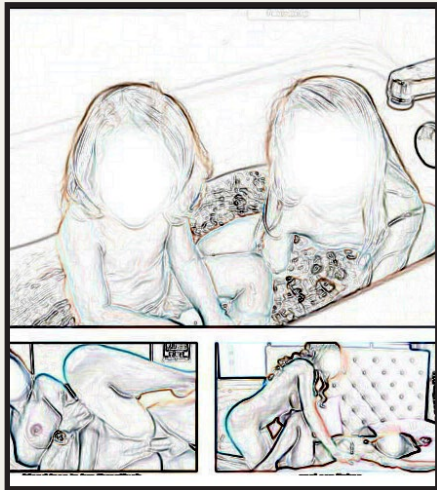
The category 'everyday pictures of children' covers neutral, non-sexual images and videos of children. These include 'everyday' or holiday pictures of children carrying out ordinary, ageappropriate activities and where the images are intended to document a memorable moment for the child, their family or friends.

The digitization of images and film footage has made it easier and faster than ever to share private pictures with others, and children, young people and adults alike have embraced the imagesharing culture. This has resulted in massive amounts of online material featuring everyday images of children, including pictures that children themselves have produced and shared on various social media. In other instances, the children's parents may have chosen to share such images online to allow friends and family to follow along in their children's lives. Pictures of active, happy children can also be found on websites for day-care centres, elementary schools and sports clubs, where the intention is to show newcomers that the children are thriving there. These are all examples of contexts in which images featuring children appear in a non-sexualizing context.

In December 2018, we made special note of reports where ordinary pictures of children were placed in a sexualizing context. We decided to register this type of report. More specifically, in the period 1 January to 31 December 2019, we received 101 reports of this type, which is an average of two such reports per week. Through these reports, we are able to see that they are typically ordinary pictures of children, who are either entirely or partially naked, who are made the object of adult sexualization. For example, we frequently see images of children playing on the beach, in the bathtub or urinating outdoors. This can also include images of children in nudist contexts, where they attend nudist camps or excursions and are therefore naked. The reports also make plain that it is primarily images of girls of Caucasian ethnicity between the ages 9-12 years that are placed in sexualizing contexts on the Internet.

Various kinds of online sexualizing contexts exist in which everyday pictures of children are presented. The hotline staff typically find the images on websites with an explicit sexual content, which we will elaborate on in the following sections.

WEBSITES WITH EXPLICIT SEXUAL CONTENT



Example of an everyday picture being displayed on a pornographic website together with pornographic material. The images are post-processed to hide identity



Example of a selfie of a girl under age 18 (bottom right) being shown together with pornographic material on a pornographic website. The images are post-processed to hide identity.

Websites with explicit sexual content include pornographic websites for adults, where everyday pictures of children are mixed together with adult pornographic material. Such images can also be found on erotic websites aimed at adults that sell sex-related products and services. On such websites, the pictures of the children are deliberately taken out of their original context (e.g. social media, a sports club or a private photo album) and placed in a new, sexualizing context in which the images come to serve an entirely different and sexual purpose. When a child's image is abused in this manner, it is also shared in a publicly available sexualizing context, which undermines the child's right to control who has their images and for what purpose.

OTHER ONLINE SEXUALIZING CONTEXTS

The cases of the sexualization of everyday images featuring children that are reported to our hotline are primarily found on websites with explicit sexual content, where everyday pictures of children are mixed together with adult pornographic material. Through our work, however, we know that the sexualization of entirely ordinary images of children is by no means limited to such websites. As described in the introduction, videos and pictures that the children themselves or their parents have produced and shared on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, SnapChat, Instagram and Facebook can also become the object of adult sexualization without the images being shared in a different and particularly sexual context. These platforms, which are basically a non-sexualizing context for everyday pictures and videos of children, can become sexualizing in the manner whereby other users relate to the shared material. For example, there can be images and videos of scantily clad children that receive far more likes and adult followers and which are viewed more often than images and videos where children are fully dressed.

The sexualization of children in everyday pictures takes place on various different online platforms. Later in the report, we will examine the underlying mechanisms. First, the following sections will present knowledge about the psychological consequences for a child of becoming the object of adult sexualization.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR THE CHILD

When real images of real children are placed in sexualizing contexts on the Internet, it is not the images alone that become a sexual object; a sexualization of the child(ren) featured in the images also takes place. Becoming aware that they have been made the object of adult sexual thoughts can have psychological consequences for a child. To understand these consequences better, we must first understand how children often relate to sexuality and sexual behaviour on the background of their own sexual development.

THE SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

According to Stevnhøj and Strange (2016), sexual development already starts in infancy. Research indicates that the entire infant body is sensitive, and that touch is of great importance to a child's well-being and healthy development. Sexual development is stimulated by a child's close, physical contact to their caregivers, which can provide the child with pleasant, physical sensory experiences. Similarly, Zeuthen (2009) emphasizes how the child is not born with knowledge of their own sexuality, but that it is always shaped and developed through the child's relationships with their caregivers. Stevnhøj and Strange (2016) summarize that a child's sexuality is unconscious and that the child does not perceive their sexual sensations or behaviour as an expression of their own sexuality but merely as new sensory experiences.

Although children grow increasingly curious with age and gain greater knowledge of sexual concepts, actions and bodily sensations, adults' feelings about sexuality and desire remain foreign to them. In some periods, children also tend to think that adult sexuality and everything they associate with it is repulsive. It is first in the transition to puberty that children begin to develop an awareness of their own sexuality. This budding awareness remains immature, however, and it is not yet widespread among adolescent children that they begin to imagine themselves in concrete, sexual situations together with others (Stevnhøj & Strange, 2016).

WHEN CHILDREN BECOME THE OBJECTS OF ADULT SEXUALITY

Based on our knowledge of children's sexual development, we can infer that they do not perceive themselves as sexual beings the same way that adults do, and they have difficulty understanding adult sexual acts and feelings of desire. For children, adult sexuality can therefore seem incomprehensible and repulsive. Nevertheless, children can risk being forced into adult sexual behaviour and emotions, because children can become the focal point of adult sexuality.

Through research, we have gained considerable knowledge about the psychological consequences subsequently experienced by children who have been subjected to sexual abuse. The psychological consequences depend on the child's age, whether they are in a relationship to the adult(s) who are using their image in a sexual context, as well as the child's personality, psycho-social resources and the degree of support from their social network.

A CHILD IN CRISIS

If the child has an age and a level of reflection that render them mature enough to understand the sexual interests that adults have had for their body and that they have used their image in an online sexualizing context, the child will presumably experience a crisis response. The child may be shocked to discover that their everyday pictures, which were

intended only for friends, family and other well-meaning viewers, suddenly become part of a sexualizing – and for the child possibly repulsive – context. Consequently, the child can experience strong feelings of a loss of control and powerlessness relating to the experience that they cannot protect themselves from the exploitation of others and that they cannot make decisions over themselves and their own body (Stevnhøj & Strange, 2016). We also know that children who feel involuntarily sexualized experience great anxiety relating to the number of people who will come to view them in a sexual manner and how others will react if they find out what has happened to them. Children therefore often also react with social restraint to avoid unpleasant confrontations with others (Jansen, 2015).

A BREACH OF THE CHILD'S TRUST

The healthy development of children is heavily influenced by, among other things, whether the child has been able to enjoy fundamental trust in the adults and world around them (Fonagy, 2017). Discovering that they have been abused by adults in a sexualized context can harm a child's general sense of security and trust in the world. Moving forward, this can create problems for the child's social relations and how they relate to others. According to Stevnhøj and Strange (2016), the consequences for children are greatest if they know the adult(s) who have violated their trust instead of providing care, love and support.

SHAME AND GUILT

A child can never bear the responsibility for becoming the object of adult sexual thoughts. Nevertheless, we know that children can feel very guilty that their images have been used in online sexualizing contexts. Feelings of guilt are often accompanied by shame. Children are especially ashamed if they themselves produced and shared the images that were subsequently sexualized. This also happens even if they are aware of how their own intention with the images was not at all sexual in nature (Jansen, 2015).

CONCERNING TENDENCIES

As presented in the report thus far, the sharing of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts constitutes a violation of a child's right not to be sexually exploited. And the previous section has shown why it is important to protect children from such abuse, as it can have serious psychological consequences. When ordinary pictures of children are placed in a sexualizing context, children become the big losers. Unfortunately, our hotline experience is that this happens week after week. The next section focuses on the underlying reasons for this trend. Finally, the report is rounded off with a number of recommendations for how we can use knowledge about the motives and moral boundaries among those with sexual thoughts about children to prevent future child abuse and improve child protection.

UNDERSTANDING IS PREVENTION

When our hotline processes reports of illegal material, it is always with prevention in mind. When we remove illegal material from the Internet, the work process therefore does not always stop there. An important preventive element is also to analyse the trends and mechanisms that we see in the reports we receive as well as to investigate how this knowledge can point towards new preventive interventions *before* the report. The next section focuses on the work with prevention building on analyses of trends and mechanisms for the use and sharing of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts.

The 101 reports of everyday pictures in sexualizing contexts received by the hotline in a 12-month period (1 January-31 December 2019) reflect a trend. Understanding is the first step to prevention, and if we, as a society, will take an active role in combating the risk of children having everyday pictures abused in sexualizing contexts, we must ask: Who is using this material? What mechanisms are leading to images/videos being moved into a sexualizing context?

Our answers to these questions are based on the preliminary results from Mikkel Rask Pedersen's PhD project, which itself is a collaboration between Save the Children Denmark and Aarhus University. Pedersen's project investigates the digital lives of pedophiles with a focus on the development of digital abuse-preventing interventions.

NON-ABUSIVE ABUSE?

In our work to understand the users of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts, the first challenge is merely understanding who the user is. Historically, there has been a confusion of the words pedophile and offender among professionals and laymen alike (Seto, 2009). With respect to professional circles, this can likely be traced to the circumstance that the vast majority of the research on 'pedophiles' has taken place in clinical and/or prison environments among convicted abusers (Seto, 2009; Horn et al., 2015). With respect to laymen, there is the often-insistent narrative about 'the pedophile', who has been portrayed in the media since the 1970s as an evil sex monster (Goode, 2011). But equating 'pedophile' and 'abuser' is wrong on multiple levels. Recent research indicates that most of those with a pedophile attraction to children never actually commit abuse (Theaker, 2015). And conversely, up to half of all convicted abusers do not display a primary sexual attraction to children and are therefore not technically pedophiles (Seto & Lalumière, 2001; Seto, 2009).

That which we can and ought to take away from the above is that we must use precise terminology when describing those with sexual thoughts about children to avoid unwanted and erroneous preconceptions. We can neither assume that all sexual offenses and violations committed against children are committed by pedophiles nor that that all pedophiles will commit abuse.

In accordance with the Child Rights Convention, we believe that turning a child featured in everyday pictures and videos into a sexual object constitutes the sexual exploitation of that child. The easy conclusion with respect to the categorization of the user of this material would therefore be to say that they are abusers – and that whether or not they are pedophiles is quite irrelevant. However, the preliminary results from Rask Pedersen's PhD, entitled 'The Digital Lives of Pedophiles', indicate that such a categorization would be inappropriate to understand some of the most structuring factors for the use and sharing of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts. Such material is often used and shared as a moral and legal alternative to CSAM¹, where the basis for using such material is that it is neither harmful nor abusive. While the material will always be offensive for the child, in this report we argue that attempting to understand the user's perspective for using this material can produce insight into the processes wherein ordinary images and videos are used in a sexualizing context.

¹Child Sexual Abuse Material: documented child sexual abuse.

The next sections therefore examine how the use and sharing of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts are justified as ‘non-harmful’ through the analysis of observations of discussions found in the online support and discussion forums hosted by the organizations Virtuous Pedophiles and Visions of Alice². The focus of the data collection has been on how different online cultures help create different boundaries for how to live as a moral, non-offending pedophile. In conclusion, the similarities and differences between the forums will be discussed for preventive purposes.

VIRTUOUS PEDOPHILES – THE ‘MORAL’ ALTERNATIVE

Virtuous Pedophiles is an organization with an online peer-to-peer support forum. Here, those with sexual thoughts about children can write about the challenges they deal with living non-offending lives – lives where they do not harm children. The forum does not allow the discussion of whether child sexual abuse can be non-harmful, and the use and sharing of illegal abuse material is also prohibited. Another particular feature of the forum is that everyday pictures of children are not allowed as profile pictures or avatars³.

However, the desire to live a non-offending life does not mean that one’s sexual attraction disappears, and many people are therefore looking for a sexually stimulating alternative to abusive material, which can be compatible with living as a moral, non-offending pedophile. One Virtuous Pedophiles member writes:

” *I was looking around on the Internet and came across a nudist beach website with pictures of children. I know that these images are not illegal where I live – but are they morally acceptable? [...] I really want to make sure that what I do doesn’t harm children, and I’ve felt guilty since finding the pictures.*”

There is general consensus in the forum that if no child has been harmed in the production of the images or videos, then the personal use of the material is morally acceptable. The guilt expressed by the user in the quote above is often seen in the forum as relating to a lack of certainty that the use of everyday pictures of children in sexualized contexts does not unintentionally contribute to the harm of a child. For while the ‘personal’ use of the material might be in order, the ‘digital footprints’ resulting from our online activities often render this more complicated.

In a discussion about whether one can use everyday pictures in sexualizing contexts in a morally acceptable manner, another user writes:

” *I’ve never looked at child porn. I only follow small, adorable models on Instagram, and I think their photos are enough for me. I don’t think it’s unethical to have these normal photos. It’s OK as long as you don’t harm anyone.*”

This quote is a good starting point to understand the challenges and discussions in which the users of Virtuous Pedophiles often participate: If a child’s Instagram profile is disseminated in a sexualizing context and suddenly gets thousands of followers, the child’s pictures

²The following quotes have been drawn from the data collection for an ongoing PhD project and must not be redistributed. The quotes have been paraphrased to avoid direct text-search in order to protect the pseudonyms of the authors.

³Like an email signature, many forums allow users to create a ‘signature’, which is posted together with each of their posts, often together with an avatar, or inserted image.

on the profile might well be self-produced and in that sense has not harmed the child, but the ‘digital footprints’ from all of the followers reveal the sexualizing context that the profile has now become part of – and this cannot be said to be non-harmful. It is possible to be anonymous on the Internet, but you cannot act in a social vacuum. Your actions send ripples out into the digital social sphere. This problematizes the so-called ‘moral personal use’ of everyday pictures of children, which were actually produced in a non-harmful context. As seen in the introduction to this report, YouTube is a popular media for the use of everyday videos featuring children, and the moral implications of the platform are discussed on Virtuous Pedophiles. The following are three posts from three different users discussing YouTube and everyday videos featuring children:

” I know I can’t be the only one here using YouTube. What’s your personal set of rules? Do you think it’s OK to use everything that’s on YouTube? Or do you stick to specific types of videos? Is it better to just stop looking at all? I’m in a moral conflict about it.”

” If you look at some children’s YouTube channels, you will see 4-50 views for videos where they’re wearing a shirt, but 400-400,000 views of videos where they aren’t wearing a shirt or they’re doing something erotic. I see this as a problem. Naturally, children want views. So they do what it takes to get them.”

” When girls with online videos realize that much of their popularity is due to sexual attraction, some will obviously react differently than others. I worry about the sensitive ones [...] I would imagine that it might be difficult to handle the realization that many people get turned on by your younger videos.”

As is often argued against the use of CSAM – that one is complicit in the production of the illegal material due to a supply/demand effect – one can also contribute to the production of material that sexualizes children by being the co-creators of a sexualizing context about, for example, children’s everyday videos on YouTube.

Even though Virtuous Pedophiles takes the position that everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts can be a moral alternative to CSAM (because it does not directly harm children), the use of material by Virtuous Pedophiles users must be understood as a complicated practice, where unintended consequences must always be kept in mind so that the sexual context does not become clear to the child. Virtuous Pedophiles aspire to be moral, non-offending pedophiles, and this is reflected in their discussions of and reflections on whether or not their sexual practices can harm children.

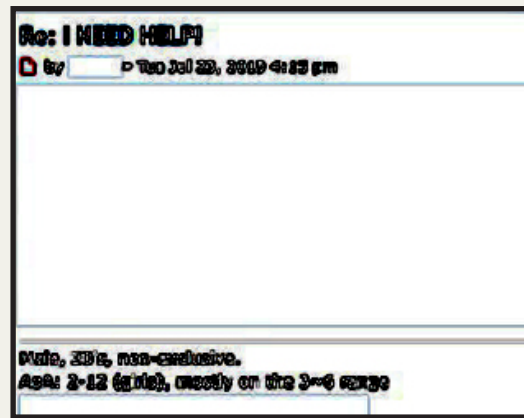
As we will see in the next example from an online forum, some users’ concerns about the use of everyday pictures featuring children in sexualizing contexts are not always about the consequences for the children; for some users, it is more about how using children’s everyday pictures in this way cannot hurt the users themselves.

VISIONS OF ALICE – THE ‘LEGAL’ ALTERNATIVE

Visions of Alice is another organization with a peer-to-peer support forum for non-offending pedophiles, but it is very different from Virtuous Pedophiles. On Visions of Alice, users are allowed to challenge the idea that sex with children cannot be mutual. You can also have profile pictures and avatars featuring children as long as the images are legal. Like Virtuous Pedophiles, however, users are prohibited from directly sharing images and videos with one another. The two pictures below illustrate the differences between the profiles on Visions of Alice (on the left) and Virtuous Pedophiles (on the right):



Visions of Alice.
The images are post-processed to hide identity.



Virtuous Pedophiles
The images are post-processed to hide identity.

Many users on Visions of Alice believe that children and adults are able to enter into equal sexual relationships. Where the potential of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts is discussed on Virtuous Pedophiles with respect to whether such images can be used without harming the child, on Visions of Alice the discussion is about how far we can push the use of ordinary and legal images of children before it harms *those who are using them*.

One Visions of Alice user starts a thread in which they write:

” What do you think about using images on Visions of Alice for profile pictures and signature pics [avatars] that are a bit on the ‘sexy’ side? Panty pics, spread legs, etc. By using them, are we confirming the prejudice that already exists against us as a group? Do people who are visiting the site get the impression that we’re only interested in one thing? On the other hand, shouldn’t we have a place where we can be ourselves and do what we want?”

It is normal on Visions of Alice to use everyday pictures⁴ of children as profile and signature pictures, and the above is an example of a discussion about whether it would be problematic if these images were even more sexual (still legal, but ostensibly in the grey zone referred to above).

⁴Some of the images on Visions of Alice will be of a character that we, in the hotline context, would classify as grey zone images. Here, however, they are regarded as ordinary images, as the most important dynamic here is that the images are legal.

However, the discussion is not about as to whether it can be even more harmful for the child, but rather to find a balance between being able to do what they would like in a (legal) free space, without being misunderstood as the sexual monster from which they distance themselves. In the three examples below, one can therefore observe how the factors structuring the use of everyday pictures of children are about, respectively, whether the pictures are legal, whether they should be ashamed about using them, and whether they are responsible for the images ending up in a sexual context:

” You can find most of the pictures in a Google search for clothing stores, so I don’t see the harm. As long as it doesn’t cross any illegal boundaries.”

” We’re in a forum where we can speak openly about our love for little girls. Of course we think it’s sexually stimulating, and a sexy signature pic is just as harmless as a pinup. We don’t have anything to be ashamed about.”

” I also like to look at ‘candid’⁵ pictures of little girls on the Internet. Sometimes I feel guilty about it – as though I’m invading their private lives a little bit. But in an age where everyone is sharing pictures of themselves and their children, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that they end up all over the Internet”

As mentioned above, the general position on Visions of Alice is that children can be included in a mutual, non-harmful sexual relationship with an adult but that this should only happen if it does not cause harm to the child. They do acknowledge this to be illegal, however, and are therefore not interested in entering into such relationships under the current legislation. It is on the basis of this position, however, that one can observe how the use of everyday pictures of children serves as a legal sexual activity. We observe how the legality of the activity serves as the moral foundation for maintaining that those who use everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts should feel no shame, as it is not harmful. We even observe an instance of a user who believes that the sexual context in which the ordinary pictures end up should come as no surprise after one has uploaded the images to the Internet, just as the use is legitimized if they can be found using Google. The discussions are therefore more about *how sexual* the images and videos can be before they become illegal and/or have negative consequences for the users of the material.

⁵Pictures that have not been posed, more spontaneous images, usually taken without the knowledge of the individual featured in the picture.

HETEROGENEITY AND NUANCES

As mentioned above, the 101 reports of everyday pictures in sexualizing contexts from 2019 are part of an identified trend. The two analyses of discussions about the use of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts on, respectively, *Virtuous Pedophiles* and *Visions of Alice*, identify mechanisms for the use of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts. Here, it is seen on *Virtuous Pedophiles* as a moral alternative to CSAM when it is only for personal use and not shared; it should therefore be used with care, as the user leaves ‘digital footprints’ that can reveal an abusive sexualizing of the child. At *Visions of Alice*, the use of such images is different; here, as a legal alternative, where the moral use is legitimized by the legality and accessibility of the images, and the ‘damage’ from the material is more often mentioned as potentially being for the user than the children featured in the images.

A crucial difference between the two forums is how the one permits everyday pictures of children, whereas the other does not. The peer-to-peer support dimension in both forums is about creating a sense of community around a common sexual interest, but the premise is different as a result of different political and moral values. As can be seen in the image from the *Virtuous Pedophiles* forum, you can choose to write about your sexual preferences in your signature, whereas you can *show* it in pictures on *Visions of Alice*. Already here, you can see how everyday pictures and videos featuring children are brought into a sexualizing context, where it is not unusual to see comments on profile and signature pictures such as: ‘Your avatar drives me wild!’ or ‘I don’t like your taste in girls’.

Although the mechanisms identified among *Virtuous Pedophiles* and *Visions of Alice* do not, strictly speaking, point to a direct causality between various forum values and the tendency for more reports of the sharing of everyday pictures featuring children in sexualizing contexts, it might nevertheless point in the direction of a ‘prevention potential’. The two different examples point to an often overlooked nuance in the work with people with sexual thoughts about children; that is, the heterogeneity in this group. The report clearly shows how we ought to remember that people with sexual thoughts about children cannot be reduced to ‘offenders’ and ‘non-offenders’ merely on the basis of their thoughts; and the examples from *Virtuous Pedophiles* and *Visions of Alice* illustrate yet another distinction regarding the characteristics in the group of individuals with sexual thoughts about children. The distinction drawn between *Virtuous Pedophiles* and *Visions of Alice* is often classified as anti- or pro-contact⁶, but the analysis presented here also shows a practical implication/division as product of an ideological position, which refers to how one should relate to the use of everyday pictures of children in sexualizing contexts. Beginning with the users in the two different forums, we see two different examples of how one can see oneself as a non-offending and moral pedophile.

⁶A reference to an ideological belief about how sexual contact between children and adults should be prohibited or legalized.

THE BASIS FOR PREVENTION

As already mentioned, the intuitively correct label ‘abuser’ would be appropriate to describe the user of everyday pictures in sexualizing contexts. Looking at the analysis of the differences distinguishing Virtuous Pedophiles from Visions of Alice, the intuitive distinction will also be that Virtuous Pedophiles are the non-abusive pedophiles, whereas Visions of Alice are the abusers. With such a label, however, we risk overlooking the most important distinction to include from a preventive perspective; namely, that being a ‘non-offending’/moral/legal pedophile is not held up as an objective standard among those with sexual thoughts about children; instead, it is negotiated and learned differently in different groups. Online subcultures for ‘non-offending’ pedophiles create different conditions for where the moral and legal boundaries for sexual interactions with children go – and these boundaries are not always compatible with the view on children in the UN Child Rights Convention.

This knowledge is important with respect to identifying what is needed to strengthen the protection of a child’s right not to be subjected to sexual exploitation through the sexual use of everyday pictures. Indeed, the analysis of the two forums shows how the use of everyday images featuring children in sexualizing contexts can actually be an expression of an attempt to live with a pedophile sexuality without harming children. It also shows, however, that online communities can help support the notion that people with a pedophile sexuality have the right to have a place where children can be displayed sexually. Both sites reveal the need for more knowledge about how online communities and information have a real impact on how persons with a sexual interest in children live with these thoughts. When a person with a pedophile sexuality goes online to find answers with respect to how to live a life with these thoughts, the analysis of Virtuous Pedophiles indicates the need to provide guidance and resources that can support and build further on a motivation to have the best interests of the child in mind. At the same time, the analysis of Visions of Alice shows that when we, as society, fail to create the moral framework for living with a pedophile sexuality without committing abuse, then moral virtue can be mistaken for legal virtue, where one’s sexual drive becomes a matter of acting in the interests of the law and oneself rather than the interests of the child.

The analysis in the report thus reveals a banal yet often overlooked point: that people with sexual thoughts about children obviously also explore and negotiate how best to live with these thoughts as opposed to just being born as evil people who will inevitably commit abuse. The prevention of child sexual abuse should therefore not only be about how we stop evil intentions from being carried out. Prevention should also be about how we, as a society, can support and contribute to the learning process in which moral and practical boundaries are learned and negotiated among persons with sexual thoughts about children.

CONCLUSION

Article 34 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to protection from sexual exploitation. The child protection work carried out by the Save the Children Denmark hotline involves the processing of reports of child sexual abuse material. Here, we see that ordinary, non-illegal pictures of children end up in sexualizing contexts. While the hotline often sees that the sexualized context in which these images end up are websites featuring adult pornography, the report also points out that sexualizing contexts are not restricted to such websites. Sexualizing contexts can also emerge elsewhere, such as social media, where timestamps, large numbers of views of images and videos and/or followers of profiles can also reveal how the everyday pictures of children are sexualized. The report emphasizes how we must begin to take sexualizing contexts with children seriously. The lack of direct sexualization of a child that would be required to deem the material illegal is *not* to be equated with a lack of psychological consequences for the child when they are rendered a sexual object for adults. Furthermore, we have investigated and analysed the preliminary data from research produced by Save the Children Denmark and Aarhus University about the digital lives of pedophiles. These analyses indicate that the users of everyday pictures of children in a sexualizing context do not necessarily see themselves as abusers and that the motivation for using this specific type of material varies between online communities as a moral or legal alternative to illegal abuse material. Finally, we have pointed out how this knowledge emphasizes the need to develop abuse-prevention measures based on increased support and assistance for those with sexual thoughts about children. The legislation in this area must be made stronger so that children receive the protection to which they are entitled.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the background of this report, we at Save the Children Denmark believe that the following three recommendations should be met if we as a society are to live up to the goal to protect children from sexual exploitation:

1. Children are children – also online. Children should have the same rights, regardless of whether they are in the digital world or in the psychical world. Children must be protected equally wherever they are. However, there is no doubt that if a child in the psychical world is in a sexualizing context, they will get helped out of that context. Children in the digital world are not currently being helped out of sexualizing contexts. This must be changed!
2. Legislation needs to be strengthened so that it is possible to protect children when they become the objects of adult sexuality. This legislation must specify that not only can it be determined from the depicted subject, but that the context for use and sharing can also constitute whether the material contributes to the sexual exploitation of a child.
3. Help and support should be developed for young people with sexual thoughts about children, such as an information platform and anonymous self-evaluation tests. The primary purpose should be to provide young people with sexual thoughts about children with the knowledge and resources they need to live a good life without offending and abusing children.

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