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The experiences of Norwegian adolescents with online sexual messages

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Summary

This report presents the findings about **Norwegian adolescents' experiences with sexual messages**, including sending/ receiving such messages, and their feelings about those experiences, drawing on data collected in 2018 in the EU Kids Online project, with 1001 children aged 9 to 17. Only adolescents 11 to 17 were asked questions about sexual messages (n=790).

Although **the overall percentage of adolescents who receive sexual messages has increased** (32% compared to 20% in 2010), a relatively low number of younger adolescents engage in sexual communication (7% for 11-12 year olds, no increase from 2010).

Part of the sexual communication Norwegian adolescents experience is consensual and part of their exploration and sexual development; however, **some of it is not.** Almost 25% were upset about receiving sexual messages, most of them girls. Moreover, about the same percentage were asked to send sexual information about themselves when they did not want to.

Several factors were put in connection with adolescents experiencing unwanted sexual solicitations, among which: **digital skills, parental mediation,** (adolescents' perceptions of a supportive) **family and school environment**, and **cyberbullying**. The results show that different adolescents are impacted differently by different factors. **Experiencing online aggression (cyberbullying) has the greatest impact on adolescents experiencing unwanted sexual communication**, which indicates a pattern of vulnerability which migrates across different risks. Moreover, **gender differences** were apparent as well, with girls experiencing more protective effects from family and school environments, as well as due to increased digital skills (only older girls). However, the same factors were not relevant for boys in terms of experiencing fewer unwanted requests.

In terms of **practical implications**, addressing toxic peer cultures which perpetuate bullying and victimisation is needed for children to experience positive environments both online and offline. Encouraging a supportive family environment, while important for all children, is particularly relevant for boys to be able to talk about their negative experiences.

Sammendrag

Denne rapporten presenterer funn om **norske barn og unges erfaringer med seksuelle meldinger**, inkludert det å sende og motta slike meldinger, og deres følelser rundt disse erfaringene. Funnene bygger på data samlet inn i 2018 av EU Kids Online-prosjektet, med 1001 barn i alderen 9 til 17. Kun ungdom fylt 11 år og oppover ble spurt om seksuelle meldinger (N=790).

Selv om **den totale andelen av ungdommer som mottar seksuelle meldinger har økt** (32%, sammenlignet med 20% i 2010), så er det en relativt lavt andel av de yngre ungdommene som deltar i seksuell kommunikasjon (7% for gruppen 11-12-åringer, det samme som i 2010).

Deler av den seksuelle kommunikasjonen norske unge deltar i er samtykkende og en del av deres utforskning og seksuelle utvikling. **Men noe av den er det ikke**. Nær 25% har blitt opprørt av å motta seksuelle meldinger, de fleste av dem jenter. I tillegg, omtrent like mange har blitt spurt om å sende seksuell informasjon om seg selv når de ikke ønsket det.

Flere faktorer ble undersøkt i forbindelse med at unge blir utsatt for uønskede seksuelle henvendelser, blant annet: **digitale ferdigheter**, **foreldremediering**, (de unges oppfatning av) **en støttende familie og et støttende skolemiljø**, og **digital mobbing**. Resultatene viser at forskjellige unge blir påvirket forskjellig av forskjellige faktorer.

Det å oppleve mobbing på nett er den faktoren som i størst grad påvirker de som mottar uønskede seksuelle henvendelser, noe som indikerer et sårbarhetsmønster som krysser flere typer risiko. I tillegg er kjønnsforskjeller tydelige, hvor de eldre jentene i større grad opplever en beskyttende effekt og økte digitale ferdigheter fra gode hjemme- og skolemiljøer. De samme faktorene utgjorde ingen forskjell for gutter når gjaldt antallet uønskede henvendelser.

De praktiske følgene er at for at barn og unge skal kunne ha positive omgivelser både på og nett, så må man må ta for seg den giftige kulturen som forsterker mobbing og overgrep. Å oppfordre til en støttende familiekultur er viktig for alle barn, men spesielt viktig for at gutter skal kunne snakke om de negative opplevelsene sine.

The EU Kids Online research on young people's sexual communication online

Stemming from an integrated child's rights perspective (provision, protection and participation), the **EU Kids Online project** aims to offer a balanced and evidence-based approach to children and adolescents' online practices and experiences. The EU Kids Online project has first collected quantitative data on young people's online activities and risks they encounter in 2010 (including sexual messages), followed in 2013-2014 by a qualitative investigation into the meanings of problematic experiences children experience online.

In 2018, 19 countries from the initial survey, including Norway, collected again quantitative data on young people's activities and risks online, including sexual communication online. In this report, we present some of these findings.

In addition to the questions about how upset children felt about receiving such messages, the 2018 questionnaire had a significant improvement compared with the 2010 questionnaire. One such was providing response options, considering how of young people might feel neutral or even happy about receiving sexual messages. The balanced approach towards children's activities online, stemming from a **child-centred, rights-based perspective** allows for a carefully contextualised and nuanced discussion of children's reported experiences (see Livingstone et al., 2011).

Note on methodology

This report presents the findings about Norwegian children's experiences with sexual messages, including sending/ receiving such messages, and their feelings about those experiences.

- A random stratified sample of 1,001 children aged 9-17 who use the internet, plus one of their parents, was interviewed during Spring/Summer 2018 in Norway. The questionnaire included items related to young people receiving, posting/sending and being asked to send sexual messages online in the past year. For the entire national sample, 'children' refers to internet-using children aged 9-17. 'Using the internet' includes any devices by which children go online and any places in which they go online. For the questions on sexting and receiving/sending/posting sexual messages, only children 11-17 were included in the sample (n=790). Data was collected by IPSOS.

- The data collection was funded from the National State Budget 2017-2018 under the Ministry of Justice and Public Security's Proposition 1S (2016-2017) and Proposition 12 S (2016-1017) Escalation Plan against Violence and Abuse (2017-2021).

- In the overall classification of risks, the EU Kids Online framework distinguishes between risks related to content, where children are recipients of mass-distributed content (e.g. pornography) and risks related to conduct, where children are actors in peer interactions and exchanges (e.g. sexting) (see Table 1 for exemplars).

- However, as in the case of other cross-sectional studies, claims about inferring causation should be carefully considered and integrated within wider relationship dynamics and social contexts young people live in.

Table 1: Risks relating to children's internet use (exemplars only)

	Content Receiving mass-produced content	Contact Participating in (adult-initiated) online activity	Conduct Perpetrator or victim in peer-to peer exchange
Aggressive	Violent / gory content	Harassment, stalking	Bullying, hostile peer activity
Sexual	**Pornographic content**	**'Grooming', sexual abuse or exploitation**	**Sexual harassment, 'sexting'**
Values	Racist / hateful content	Ideological persuasion	Potentially harmful user-generated content
Commercial	Embedded marketing	Personal data misuse	Gambling, copyright infringement

Background: the debate on young people's experiences with sexual messages

The concerns around children and adolescents' sexual communication online have been traditionally legitimised by discourses about protecting children's innocence (Taylor, 2010). Two main scientific and media discourses about young people's sexual communication online are:

- The **effects-oriented paradigm** (e.g. what is the media, i.e. the sexual content/ messages doing to children and young people), which has been focused on how many children are exposed to sexual messages and how many experience harm (Tsaliki, Chronaki & Ólafsson, 2014).

- A different perspective, that of **cultural studies,** has expanded the debate by bringing insights into how children talk about their experiences, what meanings they attach to those experiences, and how these contribute to the formation of ethical or sexual identities (e.g. Tsaliki, 2011; Chronaki, 2014). In contrast with the protectionist views, these approaches are also concerned with how young people enact their own agency in their sexual communication online.

Furthermore, a specific form of sexual message exchange – ***sexting*** (hereby defined as sending and receiving sexual messages via online communication and devices), facilitated by widespread diffusion of smartphones among young people and the culture of increasingly private communication, has created new concerns over the past decade. Again, one can distinguish between competing discourses, stemming from protectionist or more inclusive, enabling views:

- Some of the legal aspects of sexting (even when occurring between adolescents), mainly its equivalence to distributing child pornography in many countries (e.g. the U.S.), have connected it to worries about further exploitation of children by online predators and prompted arguments in favour of **criminalisation and prevention of sexting** (Hasinoff, 2015).

- At European level, two legislative instruments are relevant in this regard: the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (also known as the Lanzarote Convention), and the EU Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and Council on combating sexual abuse and exploitation of children and child pornography. However, questions have been raised to whether and how these measures (and their implementing laws in each country) should or should not be applied to sexting between children (Chatzinikolau & Lievens, 2019).

- In Norway the penal code Section 305 regulates sexually offensive conduct, etc. directed at a child under 16 years of age, stating how "A penalty of a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year shall be applied to any person who:

  a) by words or conduct exhibits sexually offensive or other indecent conduct in the presence of or directed at a child under 16 years of age.

  b) forces or induces a child under 16 years of age to exhibit sexually offensive or other indecent conduct, unless the situation falls within the scope of stricter provisions.

  In addition section 311 regulates the "Depiction of sexual abuse of children or depiction which sexualises children", but with an added waiver if "…a person who takes and possesses a picture of a person between 16 and 18 years of age if this person consented and the two are approximately equal in age and development." In addition, other sections have been used when dealing with the issue of sexting, including section 266 on Harassing Conduct.[1]

- Moreover, young people's sexting has been often regarded as **deviant sexualized behavior** that is associated with many risks and deemed as problematic and unhealthy (Döring, 2014). Finally, even when not considered deviant or unhealthy, *sexting* can be considered as risky, when hijacked from private into public communication through misuse of personal data, of which **revenge porn**, **abusive sexting** (Hasinoff, 2012) or **image-based sexual abuse** have been of major concern over the past years.

- Both Döring and Hasinoff contend that sexting is particularly dangerous for girls due to the sexual double standard and the *"slut shaming"* of girls (i.e. girls facing moral and social repercussion for their sexual expression, consequences boys do not usually face) (Ringrose et al., 2013) and it is part of the wider context of sexuality and gender-based victimisation in schools and in youth online spaces. However, as some scholars would argue, sexting is part of young people's digital culture as consensual forms of sexual expression and intimate communication (Lenhart, 2009; Tsaliki, Chronaki, Ólafsson, 2014).

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[1] English translations of Norwegian Penal Code provided by Lovdata.

Research on young people's experiences with sexual messages

Some of the recent data about adolescents and sexting is worrisome: the survey conducted by the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS) among 1028 young people from age 14–17 years revealed **a link between relationship violence and the prevalence of sexting** (Hellevik & Øverlien, 2016). Moreover, the same study reveals that not all teenagers recognise abuse and violence within their romantic relationships, and that girls are more exposed than boys are. Other factors that increased the risk of partner-violence were having an older partner and experiencing violence at home.

Other European research highlights similar findings: A recent report from the European Institute for Gender Equality (2018), drawing on qualitative data on young people's online experiences in 10 European countries (adolescents aged 11 to 18), revealed similar trends related **to peer pressure both within and outside romantic relationships**. This especially affected girls, who face significantly more pressure to send 'sexts' than boys (Livingstone & Mason, 2015; van Ouytsel, van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2017).

The pressure sometimes comes from the **peer group as a form of initiation into sexual maturity**. One such example is to send and to ask for nudes.

"Oh we're doing this, why aren't you doing it?" sort of thing' (boy, IE, 17 - EIGE report 2018).

Sometimes, coercion into sending nude photos is part of **unhealthy relationship dynamics** among adolescents which include other forms of violence as well (e.g. threats, blackmail). The EIGE report on young people's use of digital technologies (2018) shows that across different cultures, gender inequalities are apparent also in the **victim-blaming discourses** and in the normalization of sexting as a gendered, peer-socialised practice among adolescents.

On the other hand, despite an overall negative perception of sexting, some adolescents 11 to 18 from 10 European countries expressed **several positive feelings about sexting**. This includes seeing it as a funny and flirty practice, allowing for freedom in communication, as a way of maintaining intimacy in couples separated by distance, and way to express sexual desire in a consensual relationship.

It can also be seen as a way to have sexual relationships without the risks of sexual acts in person, obtaining sexual pleasure easily and, more generally, discovering one's sexuality (EIGE, 2018, p. 61).

Therefore, new research should offer a **balanced perspective into the positive and negative aspects of young people's experiences with sexual communication** which can inform policy recommendation to ensure both protection and enable empowered participation of young people.

This report is one such attempt.

Young Norwegians' sexual communication online – addressing some concerns

The following analyses address some of the concerns about young people's sexual communication online. These potential concerns are formulated as questions to which we provide results and context based on EU Kids Online 2018 survey data.

The results address some of the worries, e.g. that young people engage in sexual communication at earlier ages or that many adolescents are upset about sexual messages they receive. The results further put in context the protective effect of *digital skills* and *parental mediation* and the links with online aggression, as these have been highlighted by previous research.

Finally, we investigate if children and youths experiences of protective family and school environments (or lack thereof) influence sexting experiences. In so we aim to give a richer image of the environment in which sexual communication among adolescents occurs.

1. Question no. 1: How many children are exposed to sexual messages online?

Although 32% of Norwegian adolescents 11 to 17 years old have received sexual messages during the past year – an increase from 20% in 2010, **this experience is highly age-dependant**. While more than half of all 15-17- year-olds (52%) have received one or more sexual messages during the previous year, 7% of 11-12-year-olds reported receiving one or more such messages during the previous year. The numbers are lower for those who report receiving sexual messages at least monthly in the past year.

Figure 1: Children who have received sexual messages online, by age and gender (comparison 2010, 2018)

- ■ % who received sexual messages 2010
- ■ % who received sexual messages 2018

Boys: 23 / 29
Girls: 17 / 34
9-10 years:
11-12 years: 7 / 7
13-14 years: 17 / 14
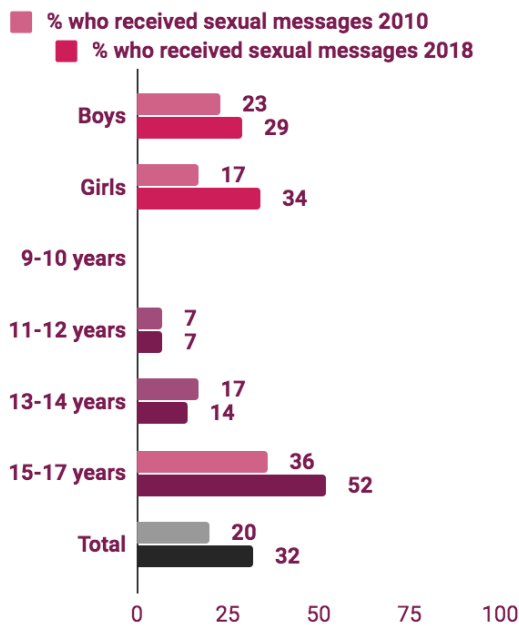15-17 years: 36 / 52
Total: 20 / 32

Figure adapted from Staksrud & Ólafsson (2019), p. 47.

EU Kids Online 2018: QF40: In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER RECEIVED any sexual messages? This could be words, pictures or videos. Base: Children aged 11-17 who use Internet (n=717). Number of children who have answered this question n=689.
EU Kids Online 2010: QC167: People use the Internet for many different things. Sometimes they may send sexual messages or pictures. By this we mean talk about having sex or pictures of people naked or pictures of people having sex. The next few questions ask you about things like this. Think about all the ways you use Internet (not text messages/MMS on your phone). During the last 12 months, have you seen or received sexual messages/pictures/videos of any kind on the Internet? Base: Children aged 11-17 who use Internet (n=766).

2. Question no. 2: How many children are upset about receiving sexual messages?

Although one quarter of those who received sexual messages were upset about it (a little, fairly or very upset**), 35% of all children and 56% of the boys said they were happy about receiving sexual messages**, while 41% felt neutral about the experience (neither upset nor happy**). A total of 11% report being very or quite upset, while 14% report being a little upset.** Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities for girls and boys to be upset about receiving sexual messages at different ages. Boys report not being upset at all ages. Girls, however, report being more upset than boys at all ages, although they report feeling less upset as they grow older (an 11 year old girl has a 0.7 chance to be upset, whereas a 17 year old girl has a 0.43 chance).

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities for girls and boys to be upset by receiving sexual messages at different ages (11 to 17 years old)
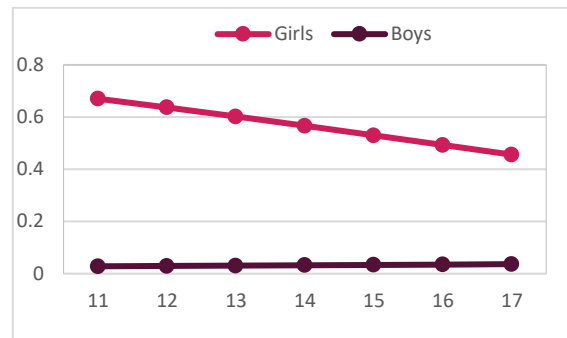

EU Kids Online 2018: QF42: Last time it happened to you, how did you feel about what you received? Response options: I was happy; I was neither happy nor upset; I was a little/ fairly/ very upset (n=182).

3. Question no. 3: Where do upsetting sexual messages occur?

One of the concerns about the nature of upsetting sexual communication for children and adolescents is related how this occurs, the prevalent conception being that this occurs in private exchanges (and usually with an adult). We therefore asked children about how the sexual communication happened (types of platforms or devices where they received sexual messages over the past year). Of those who reported receiving those messages on each platform or device, we looked at how many were upset (versus not upset) by receiving such messages. Results show that more frequently, **upsetting sexual messages happen by accident through pop-ups and where not sent intentionally** (Figure 3).

Moreover, platforms where young people communicate with more peers at the same time are reported more as venues for receiving upsetting messages than private communication (one on one), such as messages or calls on mobile phones. Conversely, **when private sexual communication happens, more often than not is part of the sexual communication repertoire young people involve in willingly with other peers**.

Figure 3: Being upset or not from receiving sexual messages by type of platform or type of communication involving sexual messages
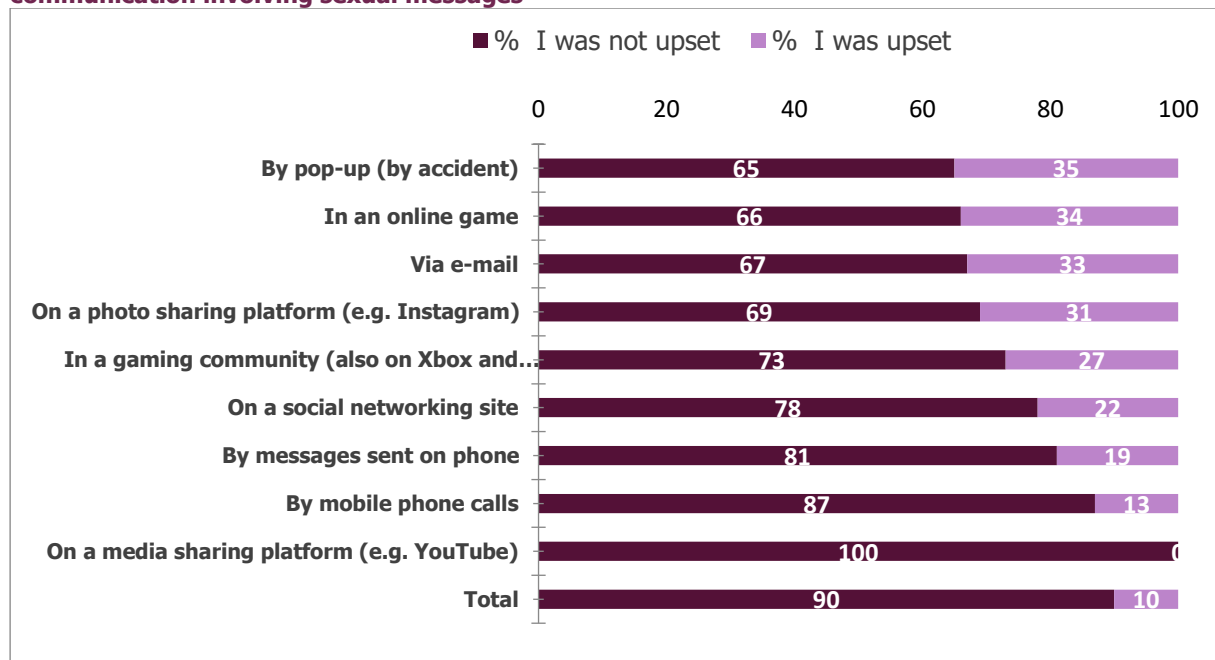
EU Kids Online 2018: QF40: In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER RECEIVED any sexual messages? This could be words, pictures or videos? Base: Children 11-17 year old who uses the Internet (n=669). QF44: [If you have RECEIVED any sexual messages in the PAST YEAR, how did it happen?] (n=212).

4. Question no. 4: Are digital skills effective in protecting children from receiving sexual messages?

Our findings show that there is a connection between the time Norwegian children spend online and the frequency of receiving sexual messages. Those who report **more time online**, also report receiving more sexual messages (P=.193, p<.00). However, those who report receiving more sexual messages also report more **knowing how to change privacy settings** on a social networking site (P=.138, p<.00). Finally, those who report receiving more sexual messages are also those who have **more digital skills** in general. These young people tend to be also older adolescents. Table 2 in the annex shows the correlations between different measures of internet use, skills and receiving sexual messages (including how adolescents felt about them).

These findings confirm one of the main conclusions of the EU Kids Online research, that of opportunities (enabled by various activities and digital skills) on one hand, and risks, on the other hand, going together (Livingstone et al., 2011). Additionally, there is **a moderate connection between adolescents who looked for health information online and the frequency of receiving sexual messages,** which points towards these being practices connected to young people developing a socio-sexual literacy (Tsaliki, Chronaki & Ólafsson, 2014).

Furthermore, we wanted to see at what ages digital skills have a protective effect, if any, on adolescents experiencing unwanted sexual solicitations. Apparently, the protective effect of skills appears only in late adolescents, after age 16. Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities for adolescents with different digital skills to receive unwanted sexual solicitations. In line with the *more use - more risks* previously observed (Livingstone et al., 2011), children and adolescents with more skills are also those who encounter more risks. However, this does not mean that all risks necessarily leads to harm.

The effect of digital skills

is always contextual,

and linked to young people's development and other factors

Figure 4: Predicted probabilities for adolescents with different digital skills scores (low- medium 1 versus medium 2 - high) to receive unwanted sexual solicitations (11 to 17 years old)
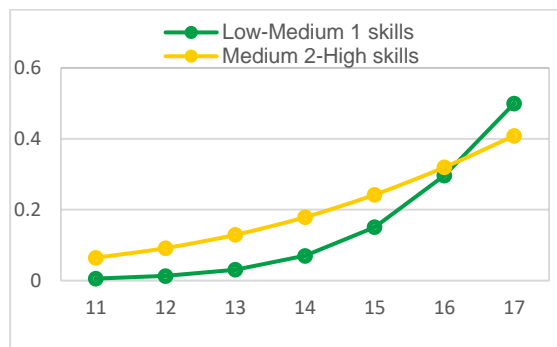
EU Kids Online 2018: QF47a-g: In the PAST YEAR, how often, if ever, have you been asked by someone on the internet for sexual information (words, pictures or videos) about yourself when you did not want to answer such questions? Base: Children aged 11-17 who use Internet (n=790). Number of children who have answered this question n=688.

Figure 5: Predicted probabilities for adolescents with different scores of active parental mediation (low, moderate/high) to receive unwanted sexual solicitations (11 to 17 years old)
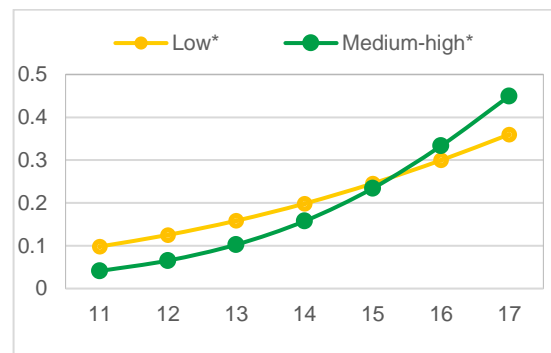
EU Kids Online 2018: QF47a-g: In the PAST YEAR, how often, if ever, have you been asked by someone on the internet for sexual information (words, pictures or videos) about yourself when you did not want to answer such questions? Base: Children aged 11-17 who use Internet (n=790). Number of children who have answered this question n=688.

5. Question no. 5: Does parental mediation have an effect on children and adolescents receiving (unwanted) sexual messages?

Parents can use different strategies when raising their children, so called mediation strategies. Generally we can separate between four type of parental mediation: enabling mediation (talking to the child about the things they see online), active mediation of online safety (talking to the child about how to stay safe online), restrictive mediation (allowing for certain activities online) or technical restrictions (filtering) put in place by parents (e.g. parental controls installed on devices).

Parents' enabling mediation have a small reducing effect (P=-.174, p<.05) on the frequency or receiving sexual messages in general and a very small one on reducing unwanted sexual solicitations. However, in general, it is younger children who report more parental mediation and also being more upset by receiving sexual messages.

Moreover, parental restrictions have no mitigating effect on young people being less impacted negatively by receiving sexual messages (i.e. young people who report more mediation report also being more upset by receiving sexual messages). Also, parental restrictions have a very low negative correlation with unwanted sexual solicitations (P=-.100, p<.05). Furthermore, previous EU Kids Online research showed that Norwegian parents rely more on enabling and supportive mediation rather than on restrictions (Helsper et al., 2013). Figure 5 shows the effect of enabling parental mediation (low compared to moderate/high) on the probability of receiving unwanted sexual solicitations at different ages. The protective effect of moderate-high parental mediation ceases after 14 years of age.

Consent and pressure in sexual communication between adolescents

Our findings show how relatively few young people have posted or sent sexual messages in the past year (10% of all 11-17 years old and only 4% of the 11-12 age group), with no remarkable differences between boys and girls. **Many concerns over young people sending sexual messages are related to them being pressured into engaging in sexual communication they did not want or initiate.** Of the young people (11 to 17 years old) who said they had been asked to post or send sexual messages (23% of all 11-17 years old and only 3% of the 11-12 age group), some of them appeared to have done so under pressure.

- From the group of older teenagers (15-17 years old), 17% **have posted or sent** sexual messages. Of all children 11 to 17, 9% have sent someone a sexual message, less than 2% have posted a sexual message where others could see it on the internet, and **4% have asked someone** for sexual information about themselves (in absolute numbers, this accounts for 67, 13 and 35 children from the entire sample).

- Moreover, less than a quarter of the 11 to 17 year olds **have been asked for sexual information** from someone on the internet **when they did not want to** and 4% have been asked this monthly or more often. As with sending sexual messages, this too is an activity that increases with age. **Girls experience receiving such requests more often than boys**, with 8% of

girls experiencing this monthly or more often, compared to 1% of boys.

A great deal of the sexual communication between adolescents

is consensual,

and part of their sexual socialisation practices. However, some is not.

- Another revealing piece of information was given by how many **adolescents reported they could have used advice about sharing sexually explicit or nude images online** in the past year: 20% of the boys and 23% of the girls said they could have used advice at least a few times.

Figure 6: How often children have been asked about sexual information of someone on the Internet, by age (11+) and gender
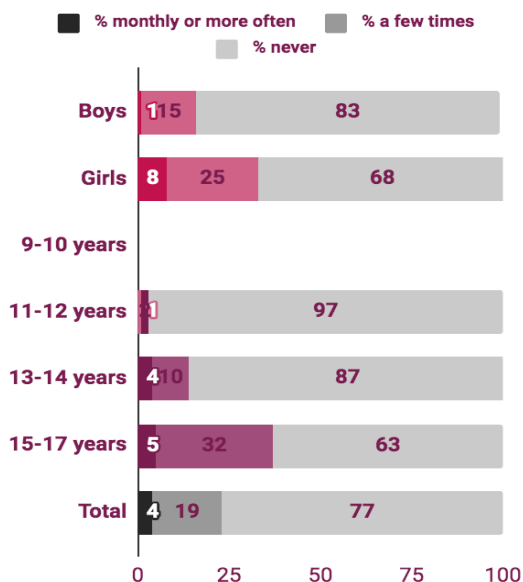

Figure adapted from Staksrud & Ólafsson (2019), p. 49.

EU Kids Online 2018: QF47a-g: In the PAST YEAR, how often, if ever, have you been asked by someone on the internet for sexual information (words, pictures or videos) about yourself when you did not want to answer such questions? Base: Children aged 11-17 who use Internet (n=790). Number of children who have answered this question n=688.

- Nonetheless, 53% of those **who have sent someone a sexual message about themselves have also asked for sexual information about the other person** (P=.657, p<.00). This indicates that sending and receiving sexual messages is rather part of the sexual socialisation and development of sexual identities for adolescents; moreover, the context in which sexual communication occurs (to whom, what kind of messages, consensual or not) is always extremely relevant for any interpretation of young people's behaviour. **Most children and young people (77 % of all children and 97 % of 11-12- year-olds) have not, during the past year, been asked to send** sexual messages or images when they did not wish to do so.

Connections with online aggression, family and school environment

Finally, we wanted to see if sexting experiences are correlated with other factors indicated as significant by previous research (e.g. family environment, violence, c.f. (Hellevik & Øverlien, 2016). In this regard, we included **being treated in a nasty or mean way over the internet** in the past year or feelings towards home and school environment (e.g. whether the child feels safe at home and at school).

- Both the frequency of receiving and of sending sexual messages showed (moderate) positive associations with having been treated in an unpleasant way online (P=.293, p<.00 and P=.226, p<.00). Having been asked to send sexual information about themselves when they did not want to holds another positive correlation with being treated in an unpleasant way online (P=.291, at p<.00).

- However, since these correlations are age-dependant, we wanted to check if being treated in an unpleasant way online has an impact on adolescents of different ages experiencing unwanted sexual solicitations. The logistic regression in Figure 7 confirms that **being cyber-bullied increases the odds of receiving unpleasant sexual communication at all ages** (a 17 year old who has been cyber-bullied has a 0.7 probability of receiving unwanted sexual solicitations compared to a 17 year old who has not been bullied – a 0.34 probability). A **similar pattern was observed also about face to face bullying** (graph not included for conciseness purposes)**.**

Figure 7: Predicted probabilities of receiving unwanted sexual solicitations by having been bullied online (or not) in the past year (11 to 17 year olds)
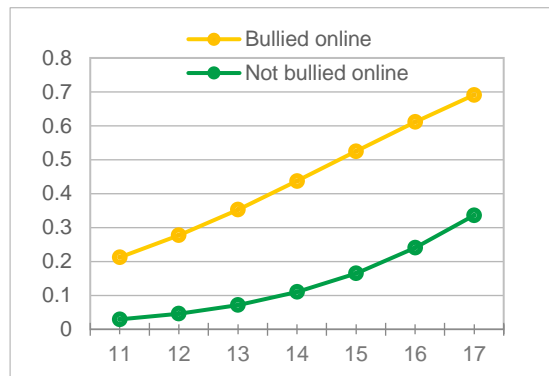
EU Kids Online 2018: QF47a-g: In the PAST YEAR, how often, if ever, have you been asked by someone on the internet for sexual information (words, pictures or videos) about yourself when you did not want to answer such questions? Base: Children aged 11-17 who use Internet (n=790). Number of children who have answered this question n=688. QF20-21: In the PAST YEAR, has anyone EVER treated you in such a hurtful or nasty way? Via a mobile phone or internet, computer, tablet, etc. [In the PAST YEAR, how often did this happen in any of the following ways?] (n=729).

- These findings raise concerns about **wider patterns of peer victimisation**, such as the ones observed by Hellevik and Øverlien (2016) in their study on Norwegian adolescents and intimate partner violence and abuse. Their study also included information about family climate (e.g. violence at home) and availability of support from their parents compared to support from friends.

- The EU Kids Online research did not collect information on family violence, but asked children about their family and school environment (e.g. feeling safe at home, being listened to at home; feelings of belonging to the school, feeling safe at school). Results show that children who did **not report positive feelings towards home and at school environments were slightly more likely to be asked to send sexual information about themselves when they did not want to do so** (P=-.154, p<.05 and P=-.170, p<.05).

- Finally, we wanted to check for the effect of family environment and school environment on adolescents receiving unwanted sexual solicitations **at different ages.** Apparently, a supporting family and school environment (i.e. children rating highly or medium-highly different aspects of their family and school environment) has a protective effect for adolescents of all ages, namely a more supportive school environment lowers the probability of adolescents receiving unwanted solicitations (a similar tendency for family environment). Figure 8 shows this effect (for brevity purposes, just the graph for school environment is presented).

Figure 8: Predicted probabilities for receiving unwanted sexual solicitations by positive school environment (low versus high scores), ages 11-17
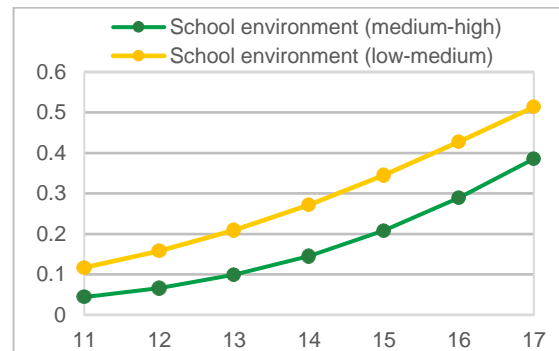
EU Kids Online 2018: QF47a-g: In the PAST YEAR, how often, if ever, have you been asked by someone on the internet for sexual information (words, pictures or videos) about yourself when you did not want to answer such questions? Base: Children aged 11-17 who use Internet (n=790). Number of children who have answered this question n=688. QJ1a-e : [Please say how much you agree or disagree with each one] I feel like I belong in my school; I feel safe at school; Other students are kind and helpful; Teachers care about me as a person; There is at least one teacher I can go to if I have a problem. Base: Children 11-17 years old who use Internet (n=790).

- Furthermore, **children who find it difficult to talk to their parents or carers about things that upset them are more likely to be asked (unwantedly) sexual information about themselves online** (P=-.191, p<.00).

Gender differences

Several particularities were noticed in **how different factors impact girls and boys** with regards to receiving unwanted demands for sexual information. The hierarchical regression models at the end of the report reflect those differences (tables 3 and 4). In a first step, the protective role of **parental mediation** of online activities (both enabling and restrictive mediation) was entered in the model. In a further step, the scores for **family and school environment** were added (a more positive feeling, a higher score). In a third step, **digital skills** were added (with an interaction term - age, since skills are age-dependant). In a fourth step, **preference for online communication** (e.g. I can talk more easily about personal things online) and **risky offline behaviours** (e.g. getting drunk, getting in trouble with teachers for bad behaviour). Finally, having been **treated in a mean way online in the past year** (i.e. cyber-bullied) was added to the model. Other variables, such as scores for peer support, or offline bullying or peer problems had similar impact (but were not added to the model in order to control for multicollinearity effects).

For girls, both the **enabling and restrictive parental mediation had a small protective effect** which disappeared when other factors were

entered. Both **family environment and school environment had protective effects** at different stages of the model. Digital skills had an interesting effect for girls - from increasing the chances of receiving sexual solicitations to actually reducing the odds when more terms were added (in the final step, older girls with more digital skills had actually a 7% lower probability to receive unwanted solicitations). A preference for online communication and engaging in risky offline behaviours increased the odds, while having been **bullied online was the most significant factor in the model. In fact, a girl who has been bullied is 4 times more likely to receive unwanted sexual solicitations.**

For boys, parental mediation had no effect. However, **a positive family environment lowered the probability of receiving unwanted sexual solicitations** for them by more than 50%. The feelings towards the school environment had no significance in the model for boys, but **having been bullied online increased the odds of receiving unwanted sexual demands** 4.5 times. Digital skills were significant, but had no protective effect for boys (more skills - more chances to receive unwanted requests). The preference for online communication had no impact and finally, risky offline behaviours increased the odds by 20%.

In terms of **practical implications**, these differences suggest that factors impact boys and girls in different ways, whereas some are common for all adolescents. Measures **addressing online and offline bullying are needed for all children** in order for them to experience a positive peer environment both online and offline. Encouraging **a positive family environment,** where adolescents feel heard and taken into account, while important for all children, is particularly relevant for boys in order for them to have positive online experiences. Addressing **toxic peer cultures - both online and offline/ at school -** therefore making the school environment safer for children should be prioritised.

Conclusions and recommendations

From the perspective of enabling young people's participation and self-expression, the approaches of Hasinoff (2013, 2015) and Albury and Crawford (2012) which place *sexting* within the **ethics of relationship accountability and right to sexual/ romantic life of adolescents** inscribe it within the self-expression rights of adolescents and extract it from the protectionist realm of adults. The results from the EU Kids Online 2018 survey on Norwegian children's internet use (11 to 17 years old) reveal that sexual communication is part of the adolescents' life, some of it occurring via digital technologies. The media-fuelled moral panics about the age inappropriate sexual communication is countered by **relatively low figures of younger**

adolescents engaging in such communication. Furthermore, concerns about the harm caused to children are countered by the high number of children (of those who receive sexual communication) who report being OK or even happy about receiving such messages.

However, the results show that **unwanted sexual communication does happen sometimes and some adolescents are more vulnerable than others.** Furthermore, results show that different adolescents are differently impacted by different factors, which renders 'one-size-fits-all' solutions ineffective. For example, **digital skills,** although mitigating some of the unpleasant experiences for older girls, need to be supplemented by other measures, such as cultivating skills related to establishing boundaries in relationships (in addition to technical skills). A new set of skills, for example, which combine these, could constitute **"digital sexual and relationship skills".**

The pattern of vulnerability reveals connections to

wider family context, as well as school environment and peer aggression

online and offline

Next, parental mediation, although having a small protective effect for younger adolescents, cease to be effective for older adolescents. Finally, online aggression, as well as the quality of family and school environments (as assessed by children and adolescents) have an impact on them experiencing unwelcome sexual communication.

The results indicate the need for a balanced approach: on one hand they point towards the need for investing more in creating **safe spaces for dialogue around consent issues and personal boundaries** in young people's relationships online and offline; on the other hand, it shows the need to stress more young people's agency in their own (voluntary) engagement with sexual content and messages (Chronaki, 2014).

From the perspective of protection rights, while further legal reforms and policy measures are needed to protect most vulnerable young people online, more resources should be invested into educating ethical behaviour, emotional intelligence and responsible digital citizenship from early ages. Additionally, **more efforts should be put into educating young people about recognising signs of peer pressure, abuse and violence forms**.

Finally, making the school environment safe for all children should be a priority. Therefore, the concerns around adolescents sending sexual messages should be replaced with broader conversations about social media that can fully account for the complex issues related to privacy, ethics and consent. A middle ground must thus be created: sexting should not be denounced altogether, but the **distinction between consensual and non-consensual practices,** which differentiate sexting as intimate communication from bullying and harassment must also be drawn. Finally, maintaining those spaces where debates about consent, harm and responsibility can flourish, especially when the distinctions are difficult to draw at times continues to be important.

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Annex

Table 2: Correlations between receiving sexual messages and how they felt about it, time spent online, knowing to change privacy settings on SNS and digital skills, mediation by parents (active and restrictive)

Variable	1	2	3
1. **Frequency of receiving sexual messages (N=780)**	1		
2. **Upset about receiving sexual messages (N=182)**	**-.176***	1	
3. **Happy or neutral about receiving sexual messages (N=182)**	**. 176***	-1.00**	1
4. Digital skills total score (0-10)	**.203****	n.s	n.s.
5. Time spent online	**.193****	-190*	.190*
6. Knowing how to change privacy settings on SNS	**.138****	n.s.	n.s.
7. Looked for health information online	**.397****	n.s.	n.s.
8. **Enabling parental mediation (N=759)**	**-.174***	**.213***	-.213*
a) Suggests ways to use the internet safely [When you use the internet, how often does your parent or carer do any of these things?] (N=743)	-.210**	.229*	-.229*
b) Talks to me about what I do on the internet [When you use the internet, how often does your parent or carer do any of these things?] (N=746)	-.114**	.191*	-.191*
9. **Restrictive parental mediation (allowing for certain activities online) (N=756)**	**-.161***	n/s	n/s

Notes *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed);
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Logistic regression predicting unwanted sexual solicitations for girls (11 to 17 year olds)

	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3				Step 4				Step 5			
	B	*SE*	*OR*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*OR*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*OR*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*OR*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*OR*	*p*
Constant	0.86	0.62	2.368	0.168	3.32	1.079	**27.647**	0.002	2.815	1.102	**16.685**	0.011	2.576	1.15	**13.142**	0.025	1.787	1.201	5.973	0.137
Enabling parental mediation	-0.449	0.175	**0.638**	0.01	-0.218	0.196	0.804	0.264	0.006	0.207	1.006	0.977	0.036	0.216	1.037	0.867	-0.046	0.224	0.955	0.837
Restrictive parental mediation	-0.441	0.436	0.643	0.311	-0.594	0.465	0.552	0.202	-0.294	0.442	0.745	0.506	-0.429	0.451	0.651	0.341	-0.307	0.461	0.735	0.505
Family environment					-0.406	0.249	0.667	0.104	-0.604	0.265	**0.547**	0.023	-0.636	0.285	**0.531**	0.025	-0.595	0.295	**0.551**	0.044
School environment					-0.421	0.198	**0.656**	0.034	-0.41	0.206	**0.664**	0.046	-0.294	0.216	0.745	0.174	-0.171	0.227	0.842	0.45
Digital skills score (0-10) by age (centered around 14 years old)									0.041	0.01	**1.041**	0	-0.071	0.034	**0.931**	0.033	-0.069	0.035	**0.933**	0.047
Preference for online communication by age (centered around 14 years old)													0.427	0.148	**1.533**	0.004	0.435	0.152	**1.545**	0.004
Risky offline behaviours by age (centered around 14 years old)													0.348	0.113	**1.417**	0.002	0.292	0.115	**1.339**	0.011
Cyberbullied																	1.377	0.351	**3.963**	0
-2 Log likelihood		354.781				345.873				329.71				305.379				289.779		
Cox & Snell R2		0.031				0.06				0.113				0.182				0.224		
Nagelkerke R2		0.043				0.064				0.159				0.255				0.315		

Note: *B* = logit; *SE* = standard error of *B*; *OR* = odds ratio; *p* = significance. Variables with significant effect have *OR* in bold.

Table 4: Logistic regression predicting unwanted sexual solicitations for boys (11 to 17 year olds)

	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3				Step 4				Step 5			
	B	SE	OR	p	B	SE	OR	p	B	SE	OR	p	B	SE	OR	p	B	SE	OR	p
Constant	0.383	0.989	1.467	0.698	2.553	1.599	**12.84**	0.11	1.674	1.708	5.335	0.327	2.37	1.939	10.697	0.222	1.114	2.044	3.046	0.586
Enabling parental mediation	-0.449	0.175	0.638	0.01	-0.218	0.196	0.804	0.264	0.006	0.207	1.006	0.977	0.036	0.216	1.037	0.867	-0.046	0.224	0.955	0.837
Restrictive parental mediation	-1.309	0.809	0.27	0.106	-1.515	0.851	0.22	0.075	-1.027	0.823	0.358	0.212	-1.616	1.025	0.199	0.115	-1.261	1.027	0.283	0.219
Family environment					-0.336	0.343	0.715	0.328	-0.753	0.365	**0.471**	0.039	-0.863	0.387	**0.422**	0.026	-0.731	0.407	0.481	0.073
School environment					-0.282	0.246	0.754	0.251	-0.278	0.257	0.757	0.28	-0.219	0.273	0.803	0.422	-0.146	0.285	0.865	0.61
Digital skills score (0-10) by age (centered around 14 years old)									0.068	0.013	**1.07**	0	0.056	0.033	**1.057**	0.088	0.07	0.034	**1.072**	0.038
Preference for online communication by age (centered around 14 years old)													-0.053	0.133	0.948	0.688	-0.074	0.135	0.928	0.58
Risky offline behaviours by age (centered around 14 years old)													0.225	0.088	**1.252**	0.011	0.186	0.09	**1.205**	0.038
Cyberbullied																	1.51	0.433	**4.527**	0
-2 Log likelihood	269.159				265.5				233.691				226.175				269.159			
Cox & Snell R2	0.019				0.031				0.124				0.145				0.176			
Nagelkerke R2	0.033				0.053				0.213				0.248				0.302			

Note: *B* = logit; *SE* = standard error of *B*; *OR* = odds ratio; *p* = significance. Variables with significant effect have *OR* in bold.