Parents' perceptions of their children's exposure to online sexual harms

A study of parents/ guardians in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa

CONDUCTED BY

ECONOMIST IMPACT

Introduction

Economist Impact surveyed more than 1000 parents/guardians of children under the age of 18 across eight countries in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa.[1] The study aims to understand both how children are engaging with their parents to stay safer online and the changes that parents believe need to occur to protect children against child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The survey asked respondents about their children's exposure to online sexual harms, how they responded to this exposure and the challenges that parents/guardians face in helping to protect their children online. Questions centred on five potential online sexual harms:[2]

- Receiving a message and/or content that is potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source

- Someone sharing their child's images, videos and/or messages with someone else when their child did not want them to

- Someone asking their child to keep a part of their online interactions a secret

- Someone asking their child to do something online that made their child feel uncomfortable or that their child did not want to do

- Someone trying to talk to their child about sexually explicit topics or send their sexually explicit images, videos or messages online

The key findings of this research are presented throughout.

Methodology

This study is based on data gathered through an online survey of 1,029 parents and guardians of children ages 0 to 17 conducted from June to July 2023. The respondents were equally split across genders with natural fallout across age, income and ethnicity/race. The results are statistically significant.

1   Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Colombia.
2   A set of harmful behaviours that can be considered online child sexual exploitation and abuse.
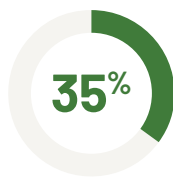
Key Findings

According to their parents, over half of children have access to the internet through a personal mobile device.

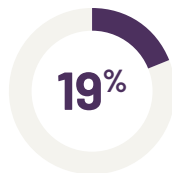| Personal mobile device	Personal laptop computer	Personal tablet
55%	**35**%	**33**%

Percentage of respondents who said their child had regular access to the internet through each type of device. Regular access to the internet is defined as going online at least once a week.
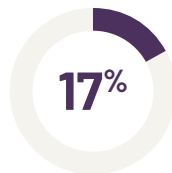
Overall, 55% of respondents said their child/children had spoken to them about experiencing a potential online sexual harm.

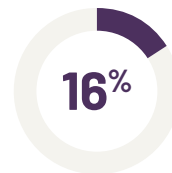| **31**%	**19**%	**17**%	**16**%	**14**%
Received a message and/or content that is potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source	Someone shared their images, videos and/or messages with someone else when they did not want them to	Someone asked them to keep a part of their online interactions a secret	Someone asked them to do something online that made them feel uncomfortable or that they did not want to do	Someone tried to talk to them about sexually explicit topics or send them sexually explicit images, videos or messages online
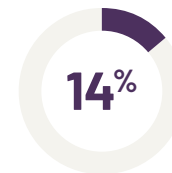
Percentage of respondents who said their child had spoken to them about experiencing one of the online sexual harms considered.

This was more common among parents in Sub-Saharan Africa than parents in Latin America.

Latin America

15%
Someone shared their images

16%
Were asked to keep their interactions a secret

16%
Asked to do something they didn't want to do

12%
Tried to talk to them about sexually explicit topics

Sub-Saharan Africa

22%

19%

15%

17%

Percentage of respondents who said their child had spoken to them about experiencing each online sexual harm considered by region.

Overall, 50% of parents/guardians said that their children told them about experiencing an online sexual harm when they were under the age of nine.
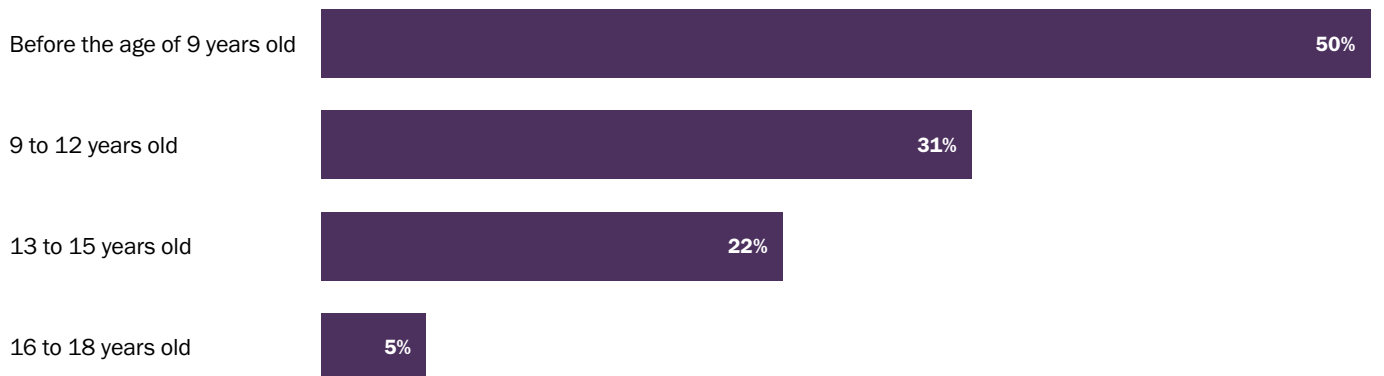
Before the age of 9 years old	50%
9 to 12 years old	31%
13 to 15 years old	22%
16 to 18 years old	5%

Of the respondents who said their child had spoken to them about experiencing at least one online sexual harm considered, the percentage that indicated their child's age at the time of disclosure (multiple selection)

Children were most likely to tell their parents about online sexual harms perpetrated by someone they did not know.
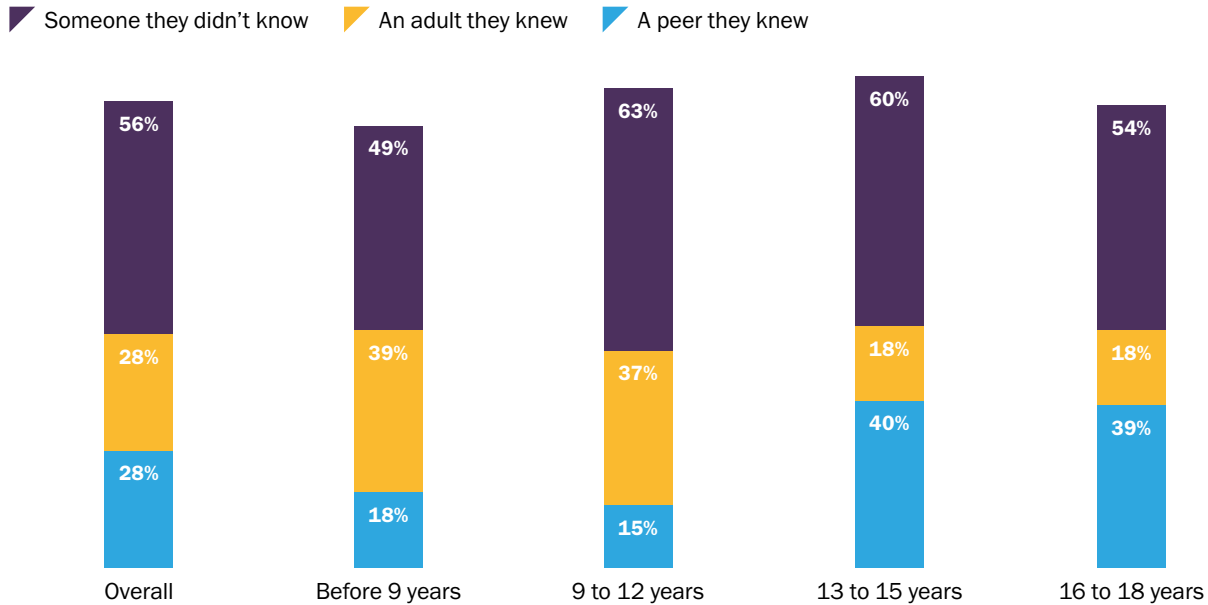
■ Someone they didn't know   ▲ An adult they knew   ▲ A peer they knew

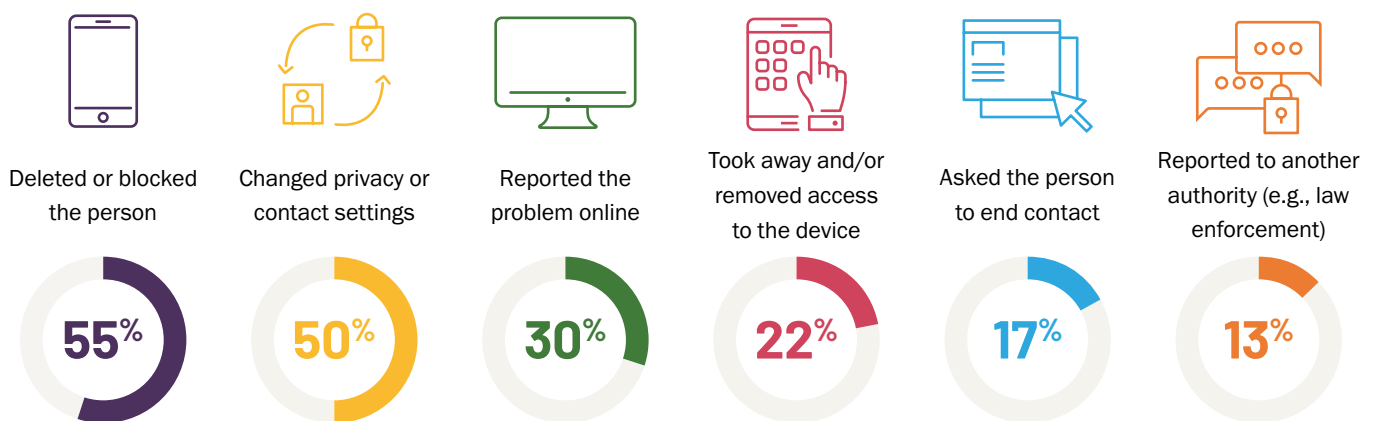|	Overall	Before 9 years	9 to 12 years	13 to 15 years	16 to 18 years
Someone they didn't know	56%	49%	63%	60%	54%
An adult they knew	28%	39%	37%	18%	18%
A peer they knew	28%	18%	15%	40%	39%

Of the respondents who said their child had spoken to them about experiencing at least one online sexual harm considered in the study, the percentage that selected each type of person the child was interacting with (multiple selection).
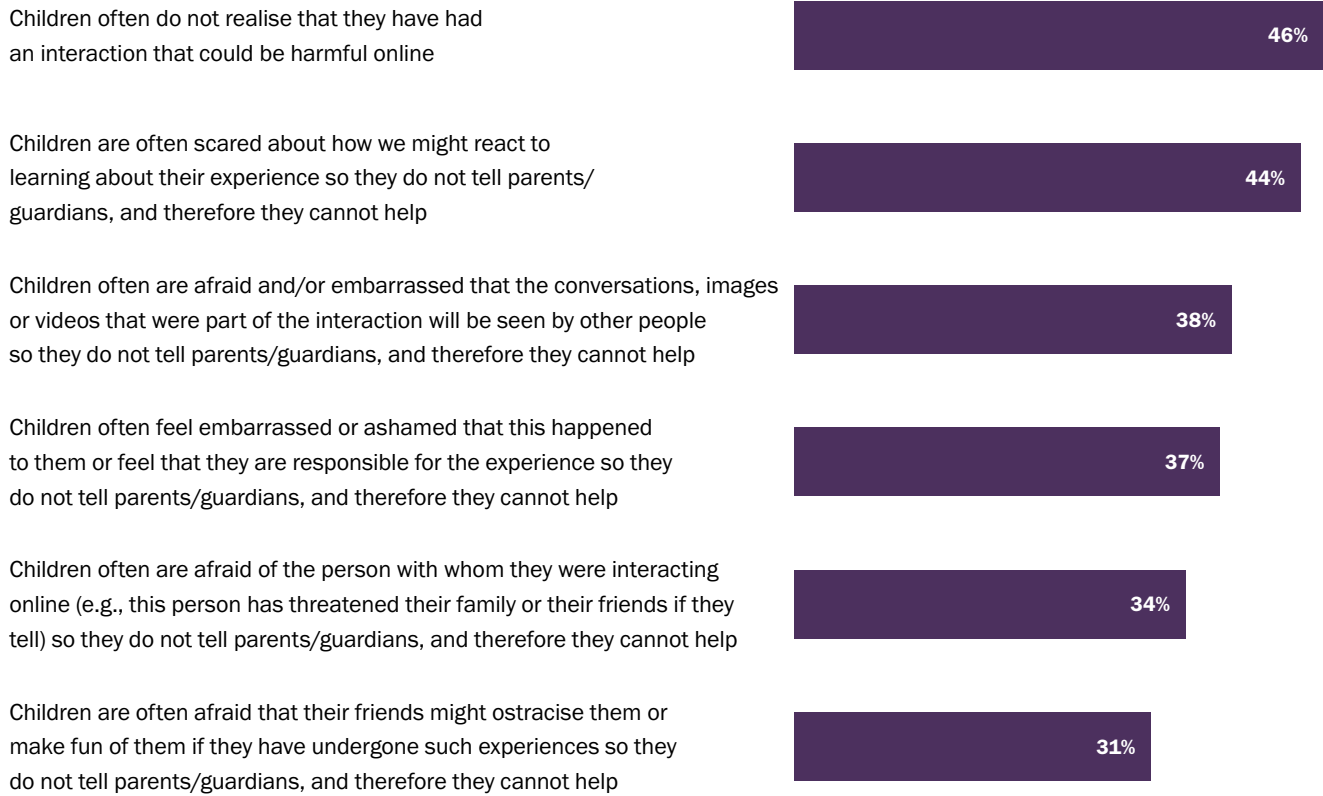
For the purposes of this study, an adult or a peer the child knew is defined as a person who the child had engaged with before, either in person or through a previous online interaction.

Parents were most likely to block the person with whom their child had these interactions or change their child's privacy settings.

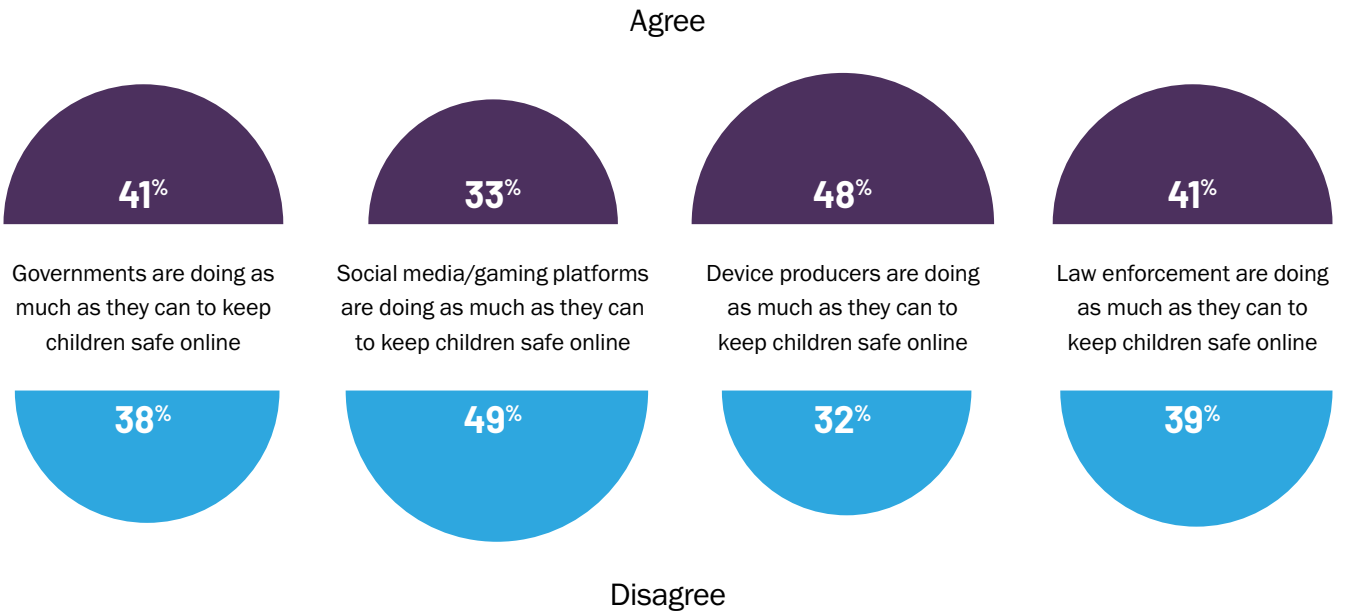| Deleted or blocked the person	Changed privacy or contact settings	Reported the problem online	Took away and/or removed access to the device	Asked the person to end contact	Reported to another authority (e.g., law enforcement)
55%	50%	30%	22%	17%	13%

Of the respondents who said their child had spoken to them about experiencing at least one online sexual harm considered, the percentage that selected each action (multiple selection).

Parents felt/feel the biggest obstacle in supporting their children when they experience an online sexual harm was/is children not recognising that their experience is harmful.
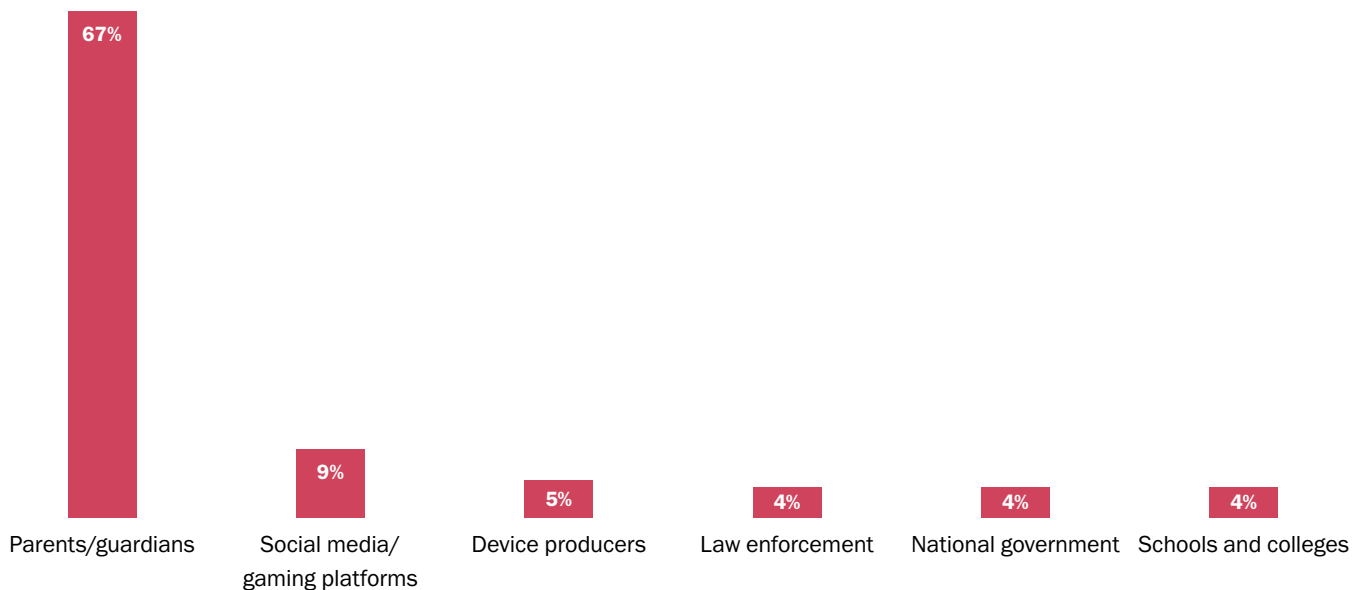
Children often do not realise that they have had an interaction that could be harmful online

46%

Children are often scared about how we might react to learning about their experience so they do not tell parents/guardians, and therefore they cannot help

44%

Children often are afraid and/or embarrassed that the conversations, images or videos that were part of the interaction will be seen by other people so they do not tell parents/guardians, and therefore they cannot help

38%

Children often feel embarrassed or ashamed that this happened to them or feel that they are responsible for the experience so they do not tell parents/guardians, and therefore they cannot help

37%

Children often are afraid of the person with whom they were interacting online (e.g., this person has threatened their family or their friends if they tell) so they do not tell parents/guardians, and therefore they cannot help

34%

Children are often afraid that their friends might ostracise them or make fun of them if they have undergone such experiences so they do not tell parents/guardians, and therefore they cannot help

31%

Percentage of all respondents who selected the barrier (multiple selection).

One in two parents/guardians do not think social media and gaming platforms are doing enough to keep children safe online.

Agree

41%

Governments are doing as much as they can to keep children safe online

38%

33%

Social media/gaming platforms are doing as much as they can to keep children safe online

49%

48%

Device producers are doing as much as they can to keep children safe online

32%

41%

Law enforcement are doing as much as they can to keep children safe online

39%

Disagree

Percentage of all respondents. Agree is an aggregate of "agree" and "strongly agree". Disagree is an aggregate of "disagree" and "strongly disagree".

...and, as a result, nearly two-thirds of parents feel that the responsibility to keep children safe online falls to them.

67% Parents/guardians

9% Social media/gaming platforms

5% Device producers

4% Law enforcement

4% National government

4% Schools and colleges

Percentage of all respondents who ranked each stakeholder group first as having the responsibility for keeping children safe online.

Conclusion

In 2021, Economist Impact conducted a global study that surveyed over 5,000 18 to 20 year olds on their childhood experiences of four of the online sexual harms considered in this 2023 study of parents and guardians. Reported rates of experience of these online sexual harms were much higher in the survey of over 5,000 18 to 20 year olds than in the survey of parents and guardians: an average of 29% across the four harms compared with 17%.

There are two likely explanations for this gap. Firstly, more incidents of online sexual harms occur when children are teenagers than when they are younger, but younger children are more likely to report these incidents to their parents than teenagers are (see figure below). Secondly, many children are afraid to tell their parents about their experiences of online sexual harms. This hesitancy to disclose can be a result of many factors such as fear of how their parents/guardians might react to embarrassment to threats from the perpetrator. Parents are aware of this hesitancy to disclose: 44% of them thought that one of the biggest barriers parents face in supporting their children through an experience of online sexual harm is that children are often scared about how they might react to learning about their experience so they do not disclose.

Despite these gaps between levels of experience of online sexual harms during childhood and disclosure to parents, it is clear that experiences of online sexual harms during childhood are high and many parents feel responsible for their children's safety online. This feeling of responsibility is being driven by the belief that many stakeholders are not doing enough to keep children safe online. Although parents are part of the solution to protect children online, they should not feel that the burden falls entirely on them.

Very few parents have had the opportunity to engage directly with government, social media and gaming platforms, device producers and law enforcement to understand how they are working to protect children. A more coordinated approach that integrates parents and youth could help develop more effective, comprehensive prevention mechanisms.

■ 18 year olds' experiences of someone trying to speak about sexually explicit topics during childhood (Globally)

■ 18 year olds' experiences of someone asking them to do something sexually explicit online that made them uncomfortable during childhood (Globally)

■ Age at which children told parents about their experiences of online sexual harms (Latin America & Sub-Saharan Africa)
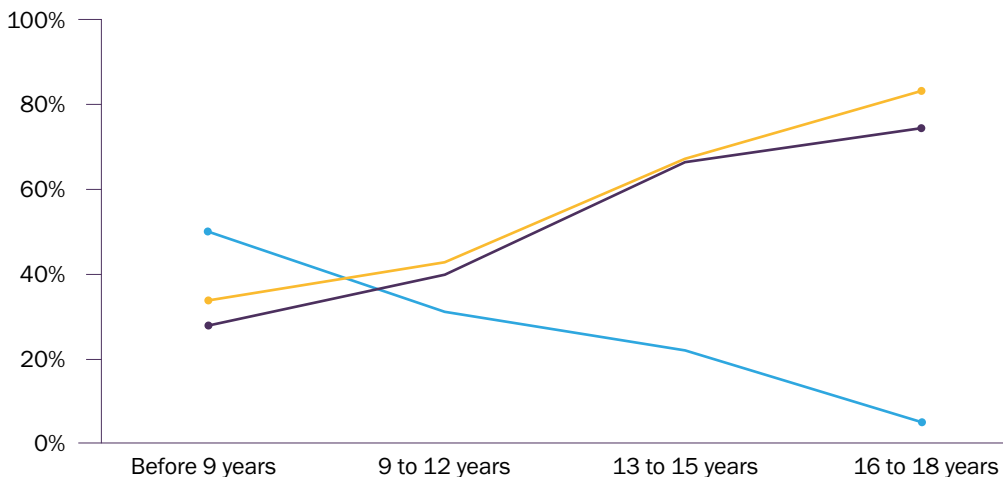
Age at which respondents who had experienced online sexual harms during childhood or whose children experienced online sexual harms during childhood had these experiences, %.

Notes: The data for this figure is drawn from a 2023 WeProtect Global Alliance study, conducted by Economist Impact, that surveyed 2,000 18 year olds in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland about their experiences of online sexual harms during childhood. To see the study, please visit here.