Chapter 7
Young people's Experiences of Sexting and Online Sexual Victimization

Carolina Lunde and **Malin Joleby**

For today's youth, using digital devices for social interaction is part of everyday life. This has also meant that internet and smartphones are used for sexual purposes, which carries both opportunities and risks for young people. In this chapter, we present a narrative overview of empirical work focusing on young people's experiences of sexting and online sexual victimization. An important point of departure is that in order to fully understand young people's online experiences, we need to learn more about the developmental underpinnings that render young people extra vulnerable when they engage in sexual activities through the digital landscape. The main part of the chapter is dedicated to research on online sexual abuse, outlining what is known about risk factors for being abused, different forms of online sexual abuse, and its consequences for victimized children/adolescents. An important lesson is that the adult world's lacking insight into the online world of children and adolescents means that young people are left on their own to deal with online sexual encounters. Practical guidelines for the adult world and educational settings on how to address issues of sexuality, sexual interaction, and online sexual victimization are presented.

> By the age of 11, Amanda was contacted online by an unknown man posing as a young boy. They started chatting and building, in her thoughts, a trusting relationship. The boy showered Amanda with compliments, and eventually she agreed to expose her breasts for him on camera. What Amanda did not know was that he took a screen shot of Amanda topless. The man (later identified as a 36-year-old Dutch man) then used the picture to blackmail her, demanding her to perform a show on web camera. When Amanda refused, he sent the photo of her topless to all of her Facebook friends. This resulted in her being bullied in school, harassed online, and slut-shamed. To escape the harassment, Amanda relocated to a new school, but the man followed her every step and disseminated the pic-

C. Lunde (✉) · M. Joleby
University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
e-mail: carolina.lunde@psy.gu.se; malin.joleby@psy.gu.se

ture to her new classmates. Amanda changed school again, but history repeated itself. Everywhere she went, the man followed her digitally.

The story above depicts the tragic faith of a 15-year-old Canadian girl named Amanda Todd (Houlihan & Weinstein, 2014). Eventually, Amanda could not cope with the continuous harassment, and she committed suicide five weeks after posting a video on YouTube detailing her experiences. According to Gavrilovic Nilsson et al. (2019), no one intervened in response to Amanda's disclosure, with five weeks passing between posting the video and taking her own life. And although this sequel of adverse events may be rare, and extreme as it led to suicide, Amanda is not alone. Similar cases have been reported from other countries, including for instance the US, UK, and Sweden. Not surprisingly, these sad cases have received vast media coverage, evoking fear that our young (especially girls) run considerable risk of sexual exploitation online.

But as the social reality of young people has moved increasingly to the online domain, the adult world needs to recognize that the internet has become a frequently used arena also for sexual exploration. Searching for information about sex, watching porn, and exchanging sexual material are some of the activities that young people engage in online. Indeed, online sexual activities carry both opportunities and risks for young people's health and well-being. On the one hand, the internet provides an arena for exploration that could be valuable for young people's sexual development. For example, the online milieu is sometimes perceived as a safe haven where one can take control over self-presentations and experiment under protection of the relative anonymity that the digital arena offers (Gyberg & Lunde, 2015). It has also been pointed out that the internet serves a crucial sex educative role, as young people search for information about sex and the maturing body (Daneback & Löfberg, 2011). On the other hand, there is a number of new risks and challenges arising from young people's online sexual activities. Involuntary exposure to sexual content (e.g., commercial ads) may be unpleasant for younger individuals (Staksrud & Milosevic, 2017), and unwanted sexual requests is sometimes described as bombarding young people online. Concerns have also been raised over an "overly revealing generation", sharing personal information and substantial part of their everyday life through the internet (Gyberg & Lunde, 2015). In addition, a worrisome increase in police reports regarding sexually abusive online encounters have been reported from several sources (see e.g., Bentley, et al., 2019; Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019; Palmer, 2015).

In this narrative overview (Green et al., 2006) based on recent empirical work, we present a broad perspective on young people's experiences of sexting, referring to creating, sharing, and forwarding sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images via the internet or smartphones (Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2013), and online sexual victimization. Here, young people refer to minors (i.e., individuals under the age of 18), but the emphasis will be on preadolescent and adolescent youth as they represent ages when young people typically start experimenting with their sexuality online and offline. Provided the context of this book, the emphasis will also be on adverse sexual online experiences, risk factors, and harmful consequences of these

experiences. However, as adverse experiences online are an exception rather than a rule (Jonsson et al., 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020), we will also highlight how online sexual activities can serve a role for young people's healthy sexual development. Notwithstanding, the point of departure of this chapter is that in order to fully understand young people's online experiences, we need to learn more about the developmental underpinnings that render young people extra vulnerable when they engage in sexual activities through the digital landscape.

Coming to Age in the Digital Landscape

Young people born in the 2000–2010s are different from the generations before them in the sense that they have grown up with the internet being an intertwined aspect of their everyday life (Harris, 2014). Despite some inequalities in access and usage, internet use approaches almost 100% in affluent parts of the world (Smahel, et al., 2020). And as the fixed line desktop computer has been exchanged by personalized digital devices, connected to a plethora of social network services (Bell, 2010), today's young do not distinguish between the offline and online, are "always on" (Harris, 2014), and always connected to their social worlds.

Recent reports show that one of the fastest growing internet user groups is children age 6 to 10 (Livingstone, et al., 2011). In Sweden, yearly reports published by the Swedish media council show that daily internet usage has increased substantially among children age 0–8 (Swedish Media Council, 2019a). These figures are similar in other western societies (Statista, 2020). Among children age 5–8, the digital activity that has increased the most is mobile gaming (Swedish Media Council, 2019a), and at age 9 almost all children have a game or app where they get in touch with other children or adults (ECPAT, 2020). Between year 2010 and 2018, using the internet a couple of days a week or more often rose from 29 to 96% among 8-year-olds (Swedish Media Council, 2019a, 2019b). The smartphone is the preferred means of going online, meaning that there is "anywhere, anytime connectivity" (Smahel et al., 2020) for the majority of children from age 9 and up (Swedish Media Council, 2019a). It is also evident that internet and smartphone use increases even more during the teenage years, with adolescents being less monitored than younger individuals (Swedish Media Council, 2019b). Some gender differences also emerge: More girls than boys report that they use their smartphone each day for communication by texting, taking pictures, and using social media, whereas boys play games to a higher extent. It is also evident that children who may struggle with social relations, for example children with neuropsychiatric disorders such as ADHD or autism spectrum disorders, turn to the internet to a higher extent than do other children (Attention, 2016). Although this rapidly changing arena has raised concern over many issues relating to young people, one of its most obvious setbacks is that it has created new opportunities for people who want to find children to sexually abuse (Joleby, 2020). It is also evident that offenders actively approach children

on the platforms that children use, for example gaming sites and social media platforms, then trying to move the interaction into a more private setting.

One challenge with being young – in general, but also in this new digital landscape – has to do with the sheer fact that the adolescent years represent a period in life with massive biological, cognitive and social changes. Pubertal development, the hormonal process that leads to sexual maturity, usually starting at age 10–12 for girls and at age 12–16 for boys (Andersson, 2011), brings about bodily changes and an increased interest for sexual activities. Thus, one of the core tasks of adolescence is to accept one's body and establish a healthy sexuality (Wrangsjö, 2007). Increased cognitive capacities are also related to the changed nature of sexuality in adolescence, as they allow for hypothetical thinking (What if…?), improved decision-making capabilities (Should I…?), but likewise heightened self-concern (Am I good enough?). However, as the maturation of the brain is a continuing process throughout adolescence, young people are limited well into their mid 20s in their ability to process highly complex cognitions allowing for adequate risk-assessment and impulse control (Halpern-Felsher, 2009). This means that it is difficult for children and adolescents to foresee and adequately assess potential threats online, and the consequences that may follow their actions. Another core developmental task has to do with autonomy, and gradually separating oneself from parental control. In this process, the peer group increases in importance, and fitting in and being accepted by peers emerges as one of the most central concerns, making young people highly attentive to their reputation (Brown & Larson, 2009). Not surprisingly, the fear of stigmatization and exclusion from the peer group is especially strong during this time in life, and it is easy to understand the adverse impact of being threatened by rumor-spreading or the revelation of compromising information. In their striving for autonomy, adolescents also become less supervised and they may be hesitant to disclose information about their whereabouts and activities to adults, especially if the information is perceived as sensitive. This also means that if adolescents would feel the need to tell someone about an adverse online situation, they may be more likely to turn to peers than adults (Kogan, 2004).

Sexting – A Risky Opportunity for Sexual Exploration

> I really want to send nudes to a guy that I know somewhat. But I am scared that they [nudes] will spread. Is it a bad thing to send nudes?

This question was posted on the Swedish Youth Guidance Centre's website ("Är det dåligt att skicka nudes?", n.d.). By only a few sentences, the question illustrates some of the complexities with sexting (or 'sending nudes' to use Swedish adolescents' own words): having a strong desire to sext, but at the same time, being wary of the risks with giving in to the desire. The one asking the question reaches out for guidance to help with his/her decision. Sexting is one of the online sexual activities that young people engage in, or are prompted to do. As it involves visual portrayal

of one's sexual self to others, sexting can be viewed as both mediated sexual interaction and sexual media production (Hasinoff, 2013). The latter ties into the fear that pictures that have been produced for sexual interaction may later be disseminated without one's consent (as illustrated by the question above), but it also ties into the fact that sexting by minors is viewed as production of child pornography in some countries (e.g., the US). Still, adolescent's awareness of the risks associated with sexting (yes, they are aware of the risks!) does not prevent them from exchanging sexually explicit images or videos. A meta-analysis showed that about 15% of adolescents (mean age 15 years) have engaged in sexting by sending explicit pictures or videos of themselves, and about 30% have received sexts from others (Madigan et al., 2018). Prevalence rates are usually attenuated with increasing age and seems to have increased over recent years (Madigan, et al., 2018). The most common sexting partner seems to be a romantic interest, and the least common is someone completely unknown (Burén & Lunde, 2018). Although research indicates that sexting is a positive experience for many young people who engage in it (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), studies also indicate that there may be gender differences with regards to the quality of sexting experiences. For instance, a study among Swedish high-school students showed that whereas there were no gender differences in terms of the prevalence of sexting, girls who had sexted reported more negative experiences than did boys (Burén & Lunde, 2018). Girls were also more likely to have received sexts from strangers, and to report being under pressure to sext.

Thus, sexting is a neither common nor uncommon phenomenon, most often takes place within established relationships, and as do other sexual experiences, it becomes more common with increasing age. Although many adolescents have positive experiences of sexting, girls clearly seem more exposed to potentially adverse online situations. These result patterns highlight some of the nuances with young people's experiences of sexting, and could be juxtaposed to the long-standing and one-sided "risk-discourse" that has permeated public debate and much of the research to date (Döring, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Taken to its extreme, this discourse exaggerates the prevalence of sexting, and seems to aim at encouraging young people to abstain from sharing self-produced sexual material. On the one hand, focusing on the risks and potential harms with sexting is doubtlessly legitimate, as an increased understanding for the circumstances that surround sexting could inform preventive measures. On the other hand, the risk discourse delegitimizes and do not represent young people's own experiences, as young people also tend to emphasize perceived benefits of sexting (e.g., being a fun way to flirt, increase intimacy, and to gain interpersonal sexual experiences) (Cooper et al., 2016).

In turn, a one-sided focus on the risks of sexting carries a number of problems. First, it does not take into account that consensual sexting can be a part of healthy sexual relationships. Second, young people who do engage in sexting may feel ashamed for engaging in a behavior considered risky, and feeling ashamed may in turn deny them a sense of sexual agency. Third, and in line with this, young people with adverse experiences of sexting may be less likely to disclose on these experiences, as they run the risk of being blamed for their behavior. It should also be noted that research shows that sexting is surrounded by stereotypical gender role norms

and sexual double standards, with girls clearly facing more stigma, victim blaming and slut shaming in consequence of sexting (Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

Having that said, sexting can perhaps be viewed as a "risky opportunity" (Livingstone, 2008) for young people's sexual exploration. Although many adolescents enjoy sexting and have positive experiences of it, for others, online sexual activity becomes related to abusive experiences with harmful psychological consequences. Thus, it is important to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual engagement in online sexual activity. The remaining of this chapter will be dedicated to the latter, shedding light on what is known about risk factors for online sexual victimization, different types of sexual victimization, and the harmful consequences that might follow.

Online Sexual Victimization

Online sexual victimization can take many forms, ranging from sexual solicitation to extreme forms of sexual abuse taking place online (e.g., cybersexploitation). Research of young people's experiences of being sexually victimized online is growing, albeit still in its early days (Wittes et al., 2016). As aforementioned, young people are at increased risk for online sexual victimization because they use digital arenas more, and thus they are also more exposed to adverse interactions and encounters (Baumgartner et al., 2010). Young people may also be more open to interact with unknown others, which increases the risk for sexual victimization. Finally, it is well established that girls are more often victimized than boys (Joleby et al., 2020a, b, 2021; Katz et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2007), although it should be stressed that the knowledge about male victims of online sexual victimization is extremely limited.

What We Know About Who Is at Risk for Online Sexual Victimization

From previous research, it is evident that young people who are vulnerable offline also tend to be vulnerable online (Englander & McCoy, 2017). For instance, poor psychological health, low self-esteem, social isolation, having a disability, having problems in school or at home, and self-harming (Joleby et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2001; Whittle et al., 2013) are known risk factors for both online and offline sexual victimization. Belonging to a sexual minority group has also been related to an increased risk of online victimization, with a six-fold increased risk for boys and a two-fold increased risk for girls compared to heterosexual youth (Priebe & Svedin, 2012).

Apart from these more general vulnerabilities, there are some specific factors that are related to an increased risk of online victimization. First of all, young people who engage in sexting are obviously more at risk of having images or videos portraying themselves falling into the wrong hands. Although adolescents seem to view sexting within a romantic relationship as an acceptable and (more) safe practice (Burén et al., 2020), there are no guarantees since a current or former romantic partner have been the most commonly reported offender forwarding pictures without permission (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Yar & Drew, 2019). It has also been pointed out that younger age, being initially pressured to engage in sexting, and sexting to multiple receivers are associated with greater risk of online sexual victimization (Englander & McCoy, 2017). In addition, sexting is intimately related to general online risk behaviors (e.g., disclosing personal information) (Burén & Lunde, 2018), sexual risk behaviors in an offline setting (e.g., unprotected sex and having multiple sex partners), and non-sexual risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, and sensation seeking) (e.g. Jonsson et al., 2015; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). Taken together, these findings highlight that sexting behavior *can be* a symptom of other vulnerabilities and risk-taking behaviors, especially when sexting is done continuously and cumulatively (Baumgartner et al., 2012). This is also because repeated sexting increases the risk of being exposed to online sexual victimization.

Different Forms of Online Sexual Victimization

One commonly cited type of sexual victimization is *sexual solicitation*, which refers to receiving unwanted requests to engage in sexual activities. Sexual solicitation may take aggressive forms, and adolescents who have been exposed to unwanted request may report strong negative feelings, such as being afraid or upset (Mitchell, et al., 2017). According to the meta-analysis by Madigan et al. (2018), 11.5% of youth aged 12–16.5 years have received requests to engage in unwanted sexual activities or sexual talk online. A Swedish study reported that one in ten of the adolescents who engaged in sexting did so because they felt pressured, persuaded or coerced. Similarly, in a recent study, 10% of adolescent boys and 36% of adolescent girls indicated that they had felt under pressure to send sexting images (Burén & Lunde, 2018). These results are also in line with other studies that consistently show that females are more often requested, coerced or pressured to send sexting images. A qualitative study aiming to further the understanding of the situations that adolescents perceive as pressuring (Lunde & Joleby, 2021) found that the mere request to sext may be perceived as pressuring. The participants also indicated that they may feel obliged to "return the favor" if someone had sent them a picture. Taken together, these findings highlight that there is strong need to support and guide young people in how to ward off unwanted requests online.

Another frequently discussed form of online sexual victimization is when consensual sexting leads to a non-consensual sharing of the intimate image or video

(Walker & Sleath, 2017). The phenomenon is known under the embellished term *revenge porn*, and the motive is often attributed to a wish to publicly humiliate, exert power over, or control the target (McGlynn et al., 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Importantly, the term revenge porn has received critique as it does not acknowledge the seriousness of the acts (it is not pornography – it is abuse), and for its victim-blaming connotations (revenge is something that is earned for prior wrongdoing) (e.g. McGlynn & Rackley, 2017).

Similar to other forms of sexual abuse, prevalence rates of revenge porn are very difficult to obtain, but non-consensual forwarding of intimate images seems to be potentially commonplace (prevalence rates ranging from 1.5% to 32% between studies and countries) (Walker & Sleath, 2017) and increasing (Henry et al., 2017). The perpetrator is often a current or previous romantic partner, or an otherwise known person of male gender (e.g. Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Yar & Drew, 2019). In addition, young people seem to be at higher risk than adults (Walker & Sleath, 2017). There are several 'revenge porn' websites that encourage users to upload intimate images of their ex-partners (Stroud, 2014). The pictures are often accompanied with identifying information about the victim (e.g. Facebook profiles, phone numbers) and the websites allow visitors to leave derogatory comments about the individual in the picture. The creators of the websites earn money either by demanding fees in order to remove uploaded pictures, or by advertising as the sites attract a lot of visitors. In response to the obvious risk of being named and shamed after engaging in sexting, there are plenty of online platforms targeting young people that provide instructions on how to send nudes safely (e.g. Flare, 2020). Guidelines include cropping out the head, tattoos and birthmarks in order to make the picture unidentifiable, and to only engage in sexting with people you know. However, seeing that most offenders were a current or former romantic partner (Yar & Drew, 2019), these preventive measures may not be sufficient. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that young people are not naïve to the potential risks of having an intimate picture forwarded. Quite on the contrary, they believe that the risk of images or videos being non-consensually forwarded is higher than studies have reported it to be (Drouin et al., 2013).

While revenge porn includes the use of explicit material to publicly humiliate the victim, *sextortion* refers to when an offender threatens to expose an intimate image in order to coerce the victim into providing additional pictures, engaging in sexual activity, or agreeing to other demands (Wolak et al., 2017). Thus, sextortion is used to extort something (e.g. photos/videos with sexual content, money, sexual activity) for one's private purposes (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). One of the first studies on sextortion among adolescents was published in 2020 (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020), investigating a representative national sample of more than five thousand American 12–17-year-olds. Results showed that 5% had been victims of sextortion, and 3% admitted to threatening others with an intimate image they had received in confidence. In this study, boys were significantly more likely to have been victims of sextortion (5.8%) compared to girls (4.1%), contrasting the pattern in many other studies where females report more victimization (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Wolak et al., 2017). However, many scholars describe a gendered nature also in

sextortion, where girls report more negative impact upon dissemination of intimate images, whereas some boys view it as a predominantly affirmative experience (Wood et al., 2015).

Based on the definition of sextortion (i.e. threats to expose an intimate image) (Wolak et al., 2017), it can only be used against individuals for whom a first image or video already exists. Much less is known about how offenders coerce young people who have *not yet* produced any sexual material. A few studies have indicated that offenders tend to use pressuring strategies including bribes, threats to start a rumor or to manipulate pornographic images of the young person, threats about seriously injuring close friends or family, or threats to commit suicide if sexual content is not provided (Joleby et al., 2020a, b, 2021; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). By using strategies like these, perpetrators (ages 16–69) managed to incite young people (ages 7–17) to engage in a wide range of online sexual activities, from semi-nude sexual posing, to engaging in (sometimes extremely humiliating) sexual activities via photo, video or live in front of a webcam (Joleby et al., 2021). Importantly, it should be noted that some individuals who are incited to engage in online sexual activities are young children, so much younger that it is not likely that they have acted out of sexual curiosity sparked by puberty. In an analysis of children's self-produced sexual images, ECPAT (a child's right organization) (2020) pointed out that 44% of the children were clearly pre-pubertal. They also noted that the youngest children were more likely to depict an act, rather than posing in front of a mirror (which was more common among older individuals). This could include masturbating with an object or pulling down one's pants, showing the bottom. ECPAT concludes that younger children may act somewhat differently than the older ones, as they follow orders on how to behave, but perhaps without understanding its sexual connotations.

Far from all perpetrators use pressure or threats. Instead, a well-established strategy used by adults in order to prepare young people for sexual abuse is by building a relationship, either romantic or friendly. This preparatory process is often referred to as *grooming*, and has been identified in both offline (Craven et al., 2006) and online (Black et al., 2015; Joleby et al., 2020a; Williams et al., 2013) settings. In online settings, this has been done for instance by using flattery, posing as a friend, expressing love, or pretending to work for a model agency (Joleby et al., 2020a; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Some offenders have taken advantage of the anonymity that internet can offer by lying about their identity (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). In some cases, however, no deception is needed since the young person understand the sexual intentions of the offender and are willing to go along with them (Katz et al., 2018; Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2013). In contrast to the studies on 'revenge porn' which mainly was perpetrated by a former romantic partner, many offenders in sextortion and grooming were unknown to the victim prior to the online contact (71% in Joleby et al., 2021; 41% in Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016).

Consequences of Online Sexual Victimization

A few cases of online sexual victimization has reached the attention of the media, putting the spotlight on the potential severity of its consequences. As depicted in the beginning of this chapter, Amanda Todd's story illustrates the extreme consequences and suffering that online sexual victimization may cause. Yet, there seems to be a common assumption that sexual abuse conducted online is less severe than abuse taking place in an offline setting. Professionals working with abused children and adolescents have reported that online abuse was sometimes viewed as being of less immediate concern, and victimized young people have reported that their online abusive experiences are being minimized (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). In contrast, it is a well-established fact that *offline* sexual abuse is associated with an increased risk of a wide range of medical, psychological, behavioral, and sexual disorders (Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993; Maniglio, 2009; Paolucci et al., 2001). The question is whether this is true also for sexual abuse that is conducted through the online arena.

Several features of online abuse are similar to those of offline abuse: there is often a close relationship to the offender, offenders use similar strategies, and victims of both offline and online sexual abuse are stigmatized. Other features separate offline from online abuse, for example, online abuse does not necessarily include any physical meeting with the offender. The victim is also (voluntarily or unvoluntarily) actively engaged in the production of the intimate image, which complicates the lived experience of the guilt question of being subjected to online sexual abuse. Importantly, online abuse is also unique in that it almost always includes the existence of intimate images of some kind. In contrast to offline abuse that is often 'a secret', online abuse can be permanently exposed in the public domain of the internet, being nearly impossible to erase (Martin, 2014). This reality has been argued to complicate the impact of the abuse, due to the fear of the offender still having footage (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Substantial distress is often experienced, as the risk of images being circulated is perceived as never-ending. In line with this, research has shown that non-consensually shared intimate images may cause several negative emotional and mental health effects, including trust issues, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Bates, 2017). Public shame and humiliation, harassment, stalking, job loss, and problems securing new employment have also been reported (the latter among older individuals) (Citron & Franks, 2014).

Victims that have had sexting images non-consensually shared also describe suffering from anxiety when they are out in public, as they fear that someone might recognize them from the pictures (Joleby et al., 2020b; Bates, 2017). One victim reported: 'If somebody looks at you like you look familiar or something like that, you kind of wonder how they know you… You never know who's seen it, which is like the creepiest part of it, like more than anything.' (Bates, 2017). Furthermore, the thoughts about how many people have access to the images can be overwhelming. Victims of online sexual victimization have described that the abuse is

constantly repeating itself every time someone looks at the images. The knowledge that unknown individuals gain sexual gratification to their pictures can also cause a sense of being victimized over and over (Leonard, 2010).

While the fear of having pictures disseminated is justified in many cases, it is not always the goal for the offender. Instead of aiming for public humiliation, some offenders aim at privately receiving sexual gratification by engaging the victim in online sexual activity (Briggs et al., 2011). This can be done either by luring or by pressuring the young person (e.g. Joleby et al., 2020a). This type of victimization has also been related to severe psychological consequences, for instance post-traumatic stress symptoms, psychological suffering, sleep problems, difficulties in school, and internalized self-loathing (Joleby et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2019). A young person who has been lured into engaging in sexual activity with an adult might initially experience the situation as voluntary, and only as the young person grows older does he or she recognize the manipulation and the problematic aspects of sexual activity between adults and children. On the contrary, a young person who has been forced to perform sexual acts against his or her own will, sometimes under extremely violating, humiliating, or painful circumstances (Joleby et al., 2020a), might be immediately traumatized by the experience.

Practical Implications for the Adult World and Educational Settings

Thus, being the victim of online sexual victimization may cause harm and suffering for young people, and there is no reason to believe that the impact of sexual victimization is lessened only because it has been carried out online. Complicating the matter further, it is well-established that sexual victimization among young people is largely hidden from the adult world (Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Online child sexual abuse does not seem to be any different in this regard. Many cases of online sexual abuse are brought to the attention of the authorities through a police investigation, rather than by the disclosure of a child (Katz et al., 2018), illustrating the lack of voluntary disclosure to the adult world. In a study on American 10–17 year-olds, only half of the young people that had been subjected to online sexual solicitation told anyone about the abuse, and those who did most often told a friend (49%) (Priebe et al., 2013). The potential gap regarding attitudes about online sexual activities between young people and the adult world compromises communication about these matters, and risk making young people reluctant to reach out for help when what they may regard as innocent sexting suddenly turns ugly (Wittes et al., 2016). For all engaged adults who want to be there for the young people in their lives, these low disclosure rates are worrisome. What can adults do to earn the trust of young people and increase the likelihood of them disclosing online sexual victimization if it happens to them? In order to figure this out, we first have to understand why young people *do not* disclose.

Interestingly, some of the most mentioned reasons for not disclosing unwanted internet experiences was that the incident was not considered serious enough, that negative online sexual encounters happen all the time (Priebe et al., 2013), or a belief that one could handle the situation oneself (Wolak et al., 2017). These findings illustrate the potential gap between young people's and the adult world's view on these encounters. For young people, there does not always seem to be an equal sign between unsolicited sexual contacts and an abusive experience. Several factors can help explain this. First, due to sexual inquiries being so common, many adolescents have developed strategies on how to deal with them, for instance by blocking the requester, confidently speaking up for themselves, or telling a lie to escape the pressure (Lunde & Joleby, 2021). Having a clear strategy to ward off the unwanted request is empowering, and speculatively, clear strategies could help adolescents experience the situation as less intimidating or serious. Second, for many young people, online sexual requests could be welcome. The sexual development adolescents go through includes wishes for sexual and intimate experiences (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008), and receiving sexual attention online might be exciting. Young people may willingly engage in online sexual activities even with unfamiliar adults. In addition, online offenders may be skilled at grooming their victims. Therefore, many online sexual interactions between young people and adults have been described to fit the model of statutory rape rather than that of a predator praying on naïve children (Wolak et al., 2008). Presumably, this affects the likelihood of disclosing the experience.

Other common explanations as to why young people do not disclose of sexual solicitations was being too scared, too embarrassed, or fearing one might get in trouble or lose one's online privileges (Priebe et al., 2013; Wolak et al., 2017). Importantly, limiting young people's connection to their online worlds, for example by restricting their smartphone use, would equal forbidding them to interact with their social world and would thus be experienced as a punishment rather than an act of protection. If adults communicate that all contact with unknown people are risky, and that sharing photos or engaging in intimate activities online should be avoided, a young person who have done just that and ended up in an abusive situation might be reluctant to ask for help in fear of reprisal. In addition, young people are not naïve, and many are already aware of potential risks (Drouin et al., 2013).

Instead, and based on the above, it becomes evident that adults need to acknowledge the multifaceted aspects of young people's online sexual activities. Educational programs should consider the developmental context of adolescents and acknowledge that online sexual interactions are part of adolescent's everyday life (Razi et al., 2020). This is not to say that all adolescents engage in sexting – and it may also be important to challenge normative beliefs that sexting is something that everyone does. Instead of advocating that young people should avoid *all* sexual contacts online, adults should provide young people with the necessary tools needed to navigate safely online. In line with this, more and more researchers suggest that education should include efforts that teaches young people how to differentiate between sexual exploration and sexual exploitation, between healthy, supportive interactions and negative ones (Katz et al., 2018), the importance of consent, and how to engage in sexual activities safely (Razi et al., 2020) with individuals their

own age. Finally, there may be a persistent and misguided fear of talking 'too much, too soon' with children over sexual matters, but quite the contrary, the evidence suggests that these talks should start early. By the adult world not talking about online sexual activities, we fail young people and deprive them their opportunities to make informed decisions. Therefore, we will end this chapter by recapping on some concrete guidelines, provided by Save the Children (2015), of age-appropriate ways to act and talk with young people about their whereabouts online:

From 2 Years
- Just as you do not leave children unattended in a large city, do not leave them alone online.
- Engage and show interest in the child's online activities, and explore them together.

From 4–5 Years
- Introduce the subject of online risks – e.g. "*There are people online that pretend to be nice but want to harm children.*"
- But try not to frighten them, as fear might trigger curiosity.

From 6–12 Years
- Explain how it can be difficult to tell good people from bad people online.
- Explain that anyone can fake a picture, and not everyone is the person they claim to be. Explain the speed at which pictures can be spread online and that they must not post or send pictures of themselves if it does not feel ok.
- Avoid outright bans. Instead, ask the child to talk with you before continuing to connect with an unknown person online.

From 13–19 Years
- Continue to talk with the child about what they do online.
- Even if it feels uncomfortable, talk about sexual abuse with the child. Remind them of their right to their own bodies and the right to say no.
- Assure the child that it is never too late to tell you about possible abuse, even if they have done something they regret.

Throughout history, young people have been subjected to sexual victimization, and as life is also lived online (Digital Information World, 2020; Statista, 2020), it is inevitable that sexual victimization also occurs through the digital arena. This chapter illuminates that online sexual victimization can take many forms, and be of a complex nature. An intimate picture shared with a loved one can turn into an object for harassment and humiliation, a new online friendship can lead to threats and coercion, and the romantic partner met online can turn out to be someone else, and perhaps much older, than expected. It is imperative to beware of the potential risks of the digital landscape, and to understand why young people might be extra vulnerable for online victimization. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the vast majority of young people are never victimized online, and that most of the online interactions are positive and a healthy part of young people's sexual development.

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