## Against Child Abuse Professional Forum on Child Sexual Abuse in Cyber World

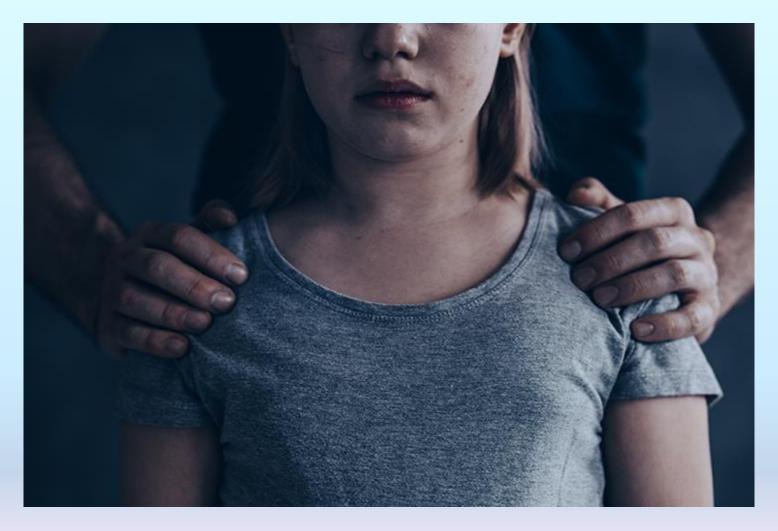
# Psychological Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children and Youths

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## Psychological Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children and Youths

- What is sexual abuse
- Characteristics of child sexual abuse
- What is Online sexual abuse
- Online sexual abuse vs Offline sexual abuse or Technology-assisted child sexual abuse
- Psychological impact of sexual abuse



Protecting Children from Maltreatment — Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Jan 2020)

"This refers to forcing or enticing a child to take part in any acts of sexual activity for sexual exploitation or abuse and the child does not consent to or fully understand or comprehend this sexual activity that occurs to him/her due to mental immaturity."

Protecting Children from Maltreatment — Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Jan 2020)

"This sexual activity includes acts that have or do **not** have direct physical contact with children (e.g. rape, oral sex, procuring a child to masturbate others/expose his/her sexual organs, or to pose in an obscene way/watch sexual activities of others, production of pornographic material, forcing a child to engage in prostitution, etc.)."

Protecting Children from Maltreatment — Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Jan 2020)

"Sexual abuse may be committed inside or outside the home or through social media on the internet by perpetrators acting individually or in an organised manner. It includes luring a child through rewards or other means for abuse, including sexual grooming which refers to designedly establish a *relationship/an emotional connection* with a child by various means for gaining his/her trust with an intent to sexually abuse him/her (e.g. communicating with a child through mobile phone or the Internet).

Protecting Children from Maltreatment — Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Jan 2020)

Consensual sexual activity between an adolescent and another person may also involve sexual exploitation by a person who, by his/her characteristics, is in a position of differential power to the adolescent. Cases where the adolescent is not mentally mature, too young (e.g. under the age of 13) or the sexual activity leads to sexually transmitted diseases ("STDs") or pregnancy may be considered and handled as suspected sexual abuse

Protecting Children from Maltreatment — Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Jan 2020)

[The younger the age, the more vulnerable a juvenile is even he/she is involved in a consensual sexual activity (With reference made to Section 123 "Intercourse with Girl under 13" of "Crimes Ordinance", Cap 200, its maximum penalty is higher than the one of Section 124 "Intercourse with Girl under 16"). As STDs or pregnancy resulting from sexual activity will affect the juvenile physiologically and psychologically, personnel should first conduct an initial assessment to identify if there is a reason to believe or suspect the juvenile is harmed/maltreated where cases involved juvenile engaging in a consensual sexual activity being under the age of 13 or having STDs or pregnancy resulting from unsafe sex. Personnel should also take child protection and related investigation as appropriate. ]

- do not usually have physical signs like in physical abuse
- hidden
- abuser usually known to the victim

- ⇒not easily revealed
- ⇒relies on victim's disclosure

- Secrecy
- Coercion
- Multiplicity
- Progression
- not merely behavioural, also relational
- power differential
- lacking informed consent



#### Reasons for unreported sexual abuse

- confusion
- fear of retaliation
- guilt
- shame
- lack of confidence
- lack of appropriate person to tell



- Delay in disclosing
- Denial of abuse even in presence of evidence
- retraction
- Inconsistent account
- Disclosure often leads to worsening of psychological difficulties and feelings of upset

- Access to Internet and social media has modified child sexual abuse
- Offenders can remain anonymous, and access vulnerable children easily
- Online sexual abuse can be any type of sexual harassment, exploitation, or abuse that takes place through screen

## Technology assisted the initiation, maintenance and escalation of abuse

- increased ease of access to victims
- lowered inhibitions
- reduced recognition of abuse, deception and manipulation
- control of night-time space
- emotional blackmail
- image-related blackmail maintaining and escalating the abuse, inhibit the victim from disclosing

## **Technology contributed to Impact**

- self-blame and shame related to making, sharing images and complying with offender's requests
- deception in the images (the abuser's account)
- victim's participation (communicating inaccurately victim consent or enjoyment)
- permanence and reach of the images → ongoing traumatization, viewers' perception, esp family and peers
- the offender's control and immersion in the victim's life

Finkelhor, Turner, & Colburn, 2022 - US Online survey of 2639 individuals aged 18-28

- online child sexual abuse 15.6%
- girls, teens the more frequent targets
- perpetrators often teens and young adults
- proportion of perpetrators who were in-person intimate partners, friends and acquaintances outnumbered those who were online-only contacts

- → not only adults or online strangers, but romantic partners and offline friends who pressure youth for sexual images or activities or who nonconsensually misuse images
- →might be better characterized as forms of intimate partner abuse, sexual harrassment, and sexual bullying

- presumption that online sexual abuse is of lesser psychological impact as no physical contact and no violence?
- no evidence to suggest that victims abused via the Internet suffer less harm than those who are abused offline
- image and online elements to sexual abuse add complexity and challenge to recovery (Hanson, 2017)

#### Jonsson et al (2019)

Online abuse associated with:

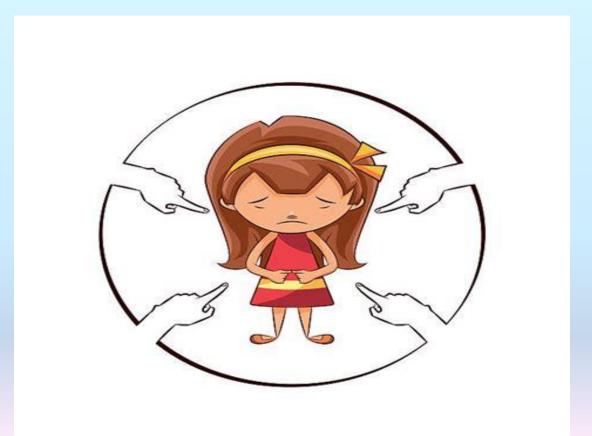
- more frequent online risk behaviour (eg. sharing personal information)
- poorer psychological health
- poorer relationships with parents
- lower self-esteem

## Technology-assisted child sexual abuse

- this term avoids false dichotomy between online and offline worlds
- sexual abuse can be of many forms involving both online and offline
- technology and online aspects to abuse can add to complexity of its impacts

## Psychological Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

- Impact on each victim is unique
- many victims show considerable resilience



## Psychological Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

- impact on victims is a result of complex interactions of various factors:
  - -the nature of the abuse
  - single incident or multiple occurrences
  - duration
  - -force, threats or sadism



## Psychological Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

- impact on victims is a result of complex interactions of various factors:
  - -their level of vulnerability prior to abuse
  - how the victim makes sense of the abuse
  - the reactions and support given to the victim

### **Physical**

- physical health problems (eg. headaches)
- appetite problems
- pregnancy
- sexually transmitted diseases

#### Social

- negotiation and rewards
- lost of trust; withdrawal
- feeling unsafe, betrayed, lonely
- Intimate relationship difficulties
- re-victimization



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### Sexual

- early sexual wakening
- sexual confusion (eg. pleasure, affection, fear)
- sexual difficulties (eg. hypersexual behaviour, sexual aversion)
- sexually transmitted diseases
- gender identity conflicts

#### **Emotional**

- self-blame
- guilt
- anger
- fear
- confusion
- unstable emotions



low self-esteem and poor self concept

#### Mental Health

- self-destructive behaviours (eg. self-harm, suicide ideations and attempts)
- anxiety
- depression
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- eating disorder
- substance abuse
- personality disorder

## Protective Factors Mitigating Impact

- Individual Level
  - positive self-concept
  - coping style and problem solving ability
  - feeling of control
  - meaning derived from experience



## Protective Factors Mitigating Impact

- Social Contextual Factors
  - Familial Support
  - Safe and stable environment
  - Peer support
  - School support
  - Interaction with criminal justice systtem

when victims are interviewed multiple times, questioned harshly and perceive police and lawyers to act unfarily impact may worsen (Kunst, Popelier & Varekamp, in Hanson, 2017)

Intervention

## **Concluding Remarks**

- poorest mental health at disclosure
- → critical point when survivors and families would benefit from support
- support to victims and parents to help process feelings upon viewing sexual images
- provide education on healthy relationships, abuse and consent, not merely online safety



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## Thank You

