

CRN Special Interest Group on CSA/CE Research Bulletin

Issue 2; November 2020



Children's
Research
Network

Children's Research Network Special Interest Group on CSA/CE

Welcome by Special Interest Group Chair, Eimear Lacey, Principal Social Worker

Welcome to the second bulletin of the Children's Research Network Special Interest Group on Child Sexual Abuse/Child Exploitation (CSA/CE), which first met in June 2019. Since our inaugural bulletin in April 2020 the group have continued to meet virtually, holding three meetings. Members include representatives of An Garda Síochána, Tusla, Children's Health Ireland, as well as across academia and NGOs. The group contributed a submission to the Review of the Child Care Act 1991, since our last bulletin.

This bulletin focuses on the area of Child Exploitation and was compiled by members who have particular interest and expertise in this area. This is an issue that requires focus and attention. We are hopeful that by dedicating a bulletin to this area we can contribute to raising awareness and knowledge of child exploitation.

I would like to thank Shaakya Vembar and JP O'Sullivan for compiling this bulletin.

Shaakya Anand-Vembar is a 2nd-year PhD researcher in TCD's psychiatry department. She is investigating the role of shame in survivors of child sexual abuse. Her other research interests include trauma in marginalized communities, implementing open science initiatives, and improving cross-cultural representation in psychology research. Shaakya is also the secretary of this special interest group.

JP O' Sullivan manages Networks and Communications at MECPATHS (Mercy Efforts for Child Protection against

Trafficking with the Hospitality and Services Sectors who focus upon a social justice response to the growing prevalence of Human Trafficking (also known as Modern Day Slavery) and the exploitation of people, in Ireland. MECPATHS collaborate closely with private, statutory and non-statutory agencies and organisations working to counter Human Trafficking including An Garda Síochána and The Department of Justice. JP has a background in Social Work and experience of programme design, development and implementation in Adult Mental Health Services, community- work and working in International Development

We are always open to welcoming new members into our Special Interest Group. If you have an interest in this area and are curious to learn more, see:

<https://childrensresearchnetwork.org/network/groups/csa-ce-group>.

You can also contact me via our Research Assistant, Mary Kennedy, at childrensresearchnetwork@tcd.ie

OUR COVID-19 RESPONSE

As highlighted in our last bulletin we explored ways in which we could contribute to efforts to ensure ongoing connection with vulnerable, and now isolated, children and families. Pooling our professional expertise, we brought together public awareness-raising information made available to any interested organisations across the country to utilise and build upon as appropriate to their needs. We remain happy to share our work with any organisation – please get in touch. We have identified some useful resources specific to managing during this pandemic as follows:

Covid-19 Web Resources

Padlet Resources for Social Work in the context of Covid-19 developed by Social Work academics at UCC:

<https://padlet.com/kenneth28burns/uvpu626mvd5k>

Various resources gathered by the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN): <https://www.ispcan.org/covid19resourcepage/>

Europol Resources and Information Regarding Covid-19: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic>

OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

MECPATHS have launched an animation on child trafficking to raise awareness amongst the public on how to identify at-risk children. The animation leans towards the definition advised by The Palermo Protocol and highlights the definition practiced within Irish law. MECPATHS continues to work with Maynooth University to educate outgoing social work professionals to be aware of child trafficking and to be in a more informed position to consider vulnerabilities they may encounter which demonstrate the presence of trafficking: <https://youtu.be/7NIGsy7rKZA>

CyberSafe Ireland in conjunction with the Irish Examiner have produced a booklet outlining ways to minimise risks and help children to be safer online. Please use the link below to access some tips <https://cybersafeireland.org/media/1497/lets-talk-3.pdf>

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Role of the Internet in Child Exploitation

Louise O'Hagan, Education Officer, CyberSafe Ireland

Together, the Internet and digital technology have changed the nature and context of child exploitation and grooming. They have created a new hunting ground for predators. Online targeting offers predators advantages over traditional targeting, and the victim does not need to be in the same country or city as the perpetrator; therefore, it can happen from anywhere in the world; and also allows for multiple targeting at the same time. Modern life heavily relies on digital technology and the Internet; both have become integrated into every part of

life. In our 2019 annual survey, CyberSafeIreland found that 93% of 8-12-year olds reported owning a smart device. These children can become targets for child exploitation and grooming. Additionally, 22% of the children surveyed reported seeing something online that they would not want their parents to know about (CyberSafeIreland, 2019).

International research highlights the role the Internet plays in child exploitation and grooming and the seriousness and alarming prevalence of online sexual abuse. A Swedish study found 30% of 14-15-year-olds reported being contacted by unknown adults who made sexual suggestions in the preceding year (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2007). In 2017 the NSPCC published a report on the experiences of children who were victims of online sexual abuse. They found victims had similar experiences which included being blackmailed and controlled by the perpetrator, they often became re-victimised, and experienced feelings of self-blame. The NSPCC study also found four out of five of the children who had experienced sexual abuse online, exhibited signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. The researchers concluded by highlighting the importance of taking online sexual abuse seriously and called on professionals who meet children for trauma and depression to evaluate their online use and behaviour and assess for online abuse. The findings of these studies highlight the role the Internet plays in child exploitation and grooming and the seriousness of the aftermath of online sexual abuse.

How the Internet is an advantage for predators

The European Online Grooming project (2012) found online predators had no previous convictions for any type of offence and scored highly on intelligence tests. This suggests that people who may not have acted offline, do act online, which can be considered as a significant concern. Such crimes may be seen as potentially low risk, high reward for predators due to the lack of police surveillance on the Internet.

Those of us working in the field are all too familiar with many of the aspects of the online world that facilitate online grooming and exploitation. The process of online grooming can extend from minutes to years, depending on the predator's desired outcome, and the victim's response. In the online world, the predator can create

fake profiles at ease, posing as anyone they want to be. The lack of social cues allows for the comfort of developing a sense of connection and gaining trust. The predator can then groom children through social engineering techniques. Social engineering uses techniques/tactics to exploit basic human characteristics and sway decision-making. Extortion and grooming require psychological methods of persuasion and manipulation. Social engineering tactics often used by predators online tend to compliment or praise the child, offer something of benefit, or frighten or induce fear in the child, to persuade the child to act in a certain way. The predators can target specific children they know or children they gather information about on social media from posts shares and likes. Some of the advantages the online world offers predators compared to offline include:

- No face to face identification (anonymity)
- Ease of developing a sense of connection (gaining trust)
- Targeting an individual child (known or unknown)
- Sending a blanket message to many children at the same time

Factors that increase vulnerability to online grooming and exploitation

The digital age has changed the behaviour of society with a limited assessment of the repercussions and risks involved.

This year, we carried out another survey asking children when they were allowed to go online; 27% of the children said that they "go online whenever they want" (CyberSafelreland, 2020). This, combined with low monitoring, could be seen as a high-risk factor leaving them open to targeting for online exploitation and grooming.

Individual differences and the role of the family play a key role in taking part in risky online behaviours. A prior history of sexual abuse can leave young people most vulnerable to grooming and sexual abuses online (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell and Ybarra. 2008). Sensation-seeking adolescents who are more inclined to take part in high-risk situations and who score low in life satisfaction, and may have family difficulties, may be more at risk of online

sexual abuse (Baumgartner, Sumter and Valkenburgh, 2012). Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, and Collings (2013) found that the factors increasing vulnerability to online sexual abuse were similar to those associated with offline sexual abuse. Risk factors in the online world include: engaging in risk-taking behaviour online, being less likely to protect themselves online (against grooming), high internet use, and lack of parental involvement in the young person's internet use. Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, and Beech (2014) interviewed children who experienced grooming online that led to sexual abuse. The reasons were given by the children for engaging with the predators varied, including individual, family, community and society. The loss of family protection was found to be central in contributing to vulnerability.

CyberSafelreland data from 2019 found that 68% of 8-13 years olds are on social media, despite minimum age restrictions of 13 set on the social media platforms. The sharing nature of social media makes children vulnerable to exploitation, as they share personal data such as age, school, address and often locations. They like pages, follow idols and join groups. These are an excellent advantage for the predator as they can pose as someone the child knows or as an idol for these children. Additionally, a common trend at the moment is on the app TikTok where children video themselves singing and dancing. These videos alone could be considered as sexual material and/or child pornography to predators. The children are unknowingly creating content and exposing themselves to exploitation.

Children often lack awareness of the existence and tactics of online predators and the risks associated with talking to strangers. Our 2019 statistics showed that 43% of children overall are talking to people that they do not know in real life online in some capacity; 16% speak to strangers at least once a week and 17% speak to them every day. About one-fifth of children aged 8 – 10 are speaking to strangers every day and a quarter of 12-year olds. These figures are slightly higher than our findings for 2017/18. Additionally, 52% of teachers surveyed do not feel equipped to deal with online safety (CyberSafelreland, 2019). This highlights that education has a long way to go to help children stay safe online.

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CHILD EXPLOITATION: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Fiction and Police Work: How a powerful BBC drama series raises awareness about child sexual exploitation

Dr. Ailise Bulfin & Det. Sergeant Jen Molony

[Child Sexual Exploitation](#)¹ (CSE) is a form of sexual abuse which can include a child or young person being given gifts or money in exchange for performing sexual activities; it sometimes involves child trafficking and organised networks of abusers. Because of its complex nature, CSE is often not well understood, even by

professionals working in the area. For example, there is a lack of awareness as to what actually constitutes an offence and that trafficking of children can take place within a country, or even a local area, rather than between countries. The BBC drama *Three Girls* (2017), a three-part fictional series based on the experiences of real victims of CSE, depicts the issue in a realistic manner that helps clarify what CSE actually entails. For this reason and because it makes an emotional connection with its audience, it can help professionals and the general public gain sufficient understanding of the issue to recognise and take appropriate action to tackle it.

Three Girls dramatises the experiences of three female teenage victims of the highly-publicised [Rochdale organised CSE case](#)², in which nine men were convicted of numerous trafficking and sexual assault offences. It was made in consultation with the girls, their families and key child protection workers involved in the case. The series secured a [huge audience](#)³, prompted an [outpouring on social media](#)⁴ including calls to add it to the school curriculum, and was partially responsible for the record [127,000 calls to the BBC helpline](#)⁵ for sexual abuse support in 2017.

Consistently refusing to sensationalise, the series unflinchingly depicts the girls' harrowing experiences, the authorities' dismissal of them as unreliable witnesses and the key failure to recognise the systematic nature of the abuse. Grounded scrupulously in the facts of the case, *Three Girls'* realist treatment of CSE, down to small details such as showing that taking a child somewhere in a taxi can constitute trafficking, means it provides an accessible way to gain an understanding of the issue and brings the dry legislation on CSE to life. The result is to make it clear to viewers that this kind of abuse is real and could happen to any child, not just vulnerable children already in care. For these reasons, DS Molony keeps a DVD copy to pass to new colleagues and considers it should be required watching for anybody working in the area of child protection, including police and social workers. (She does advise colleagues to watch it during the day 'with the curtains open' as it is such difficult viewing.) For these reasons also, *Three Girls* may have helped to inform its large audience about new types of suspicious activity to report that they may not previously have been aware of.

However, there is more to *Three Girls*' success than just its scrupulous realism. It is significant that it conveys the girls' experiences in fictional rather than documentary form. This form provides distance for the more than forty real victims. It also allows their many experiences and the complexities of the police and court cases to be distilled into the story of the three fictional girls and given a compelling plot to keep audiences watching. As a [key figure in the production of *Three Girls* points out](#)³, telling the story in drama form helped engage a bigger audience: "Sometimes people can be slightly cautious about documentaries. So it's getting it into more homes ... and to the widest possible audience.'

Also, as [Dr Bulfin's research](#)⁶ shows, fictional works invite audiences to make emotional connections with the characters and see the world through their eyes. This encourages empathy and insight into the experiences of those being portrayed in ways that factual accounts largely do not. This means that *Three Girls* can help create understanding for the perspectives of the abused girls, who were initially dismissed as making bad 'life choices'. Through connecting emotionally with the characters, both general audiences and child protection workers may be able to see beyond the defensive 'acting out' behaviour that abused children may sometimes engage in. DS Molony believes the powerful emotional response that *Three Girls* triggers may even facilitate police to hit the right kind of empathy in talking to a victim to get the breakthrough that allows them to move forward with the very complex process of pursuing prosecution.

OTHER RELEVANT MEDIA ON CHILD EXPLOITATION

'Maya' was a child within the care system in The UK who was a victim of child trafficking. Her story demonstrates how often victims can remain unidentified and can fall between the 'cracks of care'. Click [here](#)⁷ to listen to her story and learn more about Human Trafficking. Courtesy of MECPATHS.

[Hunting Warhead](#)⁸, produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, is a six-part investigative podcast detailing a global operation to expose a paedophile network on the dark web. Throughout the

journey, journalists interview survivors, perpetrators, law enforcement personnel, and family members, showcasing the nuanced ways in which CSE impacts all those involved. Available on major podcast services and the CBC website.

[We Stand](#)⁹ is an Irish podcast exploring "childhood sexual abuse, the impact it has and how breaking the silence can give survivors freedom." This new series aims to destigmatize conversations about CSA, be a safe space for survivors to share their stories, and for the general public to learn more about CSA via the contributions of therapists and child protection workers.

Hyperlinks contained in article:

¹<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/2/section/10/enacted/en/html>

²<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/dec/19/rochdale-sex-grooming-gangs-police-errors>

³ <https://www.bbcstudios.com/case-studies/three-girls>

⁴<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/calls-harrowing-bbc-drama-three-68605>

⁵<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-42522656>

⁶<https://www.ucd.ie/artshumanities/newsandevents/researchstrategynewsandevents/childsexualabuseincontemporaryculturedevelopingculturalstudiesapproaches/>

⁷<https://mecpaths.com/human-trafficking/>

⁸<https://www.ft.com/content/a113b246-0214-11ea-a530-16c6c29e70ca>

⁹<https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/we-stand-kate-brennan-harding-mFAlj3XzCdo/>

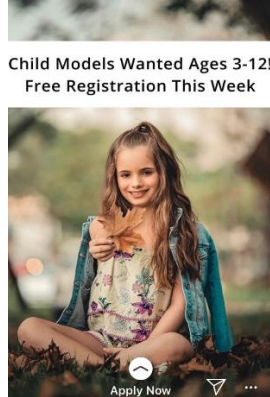
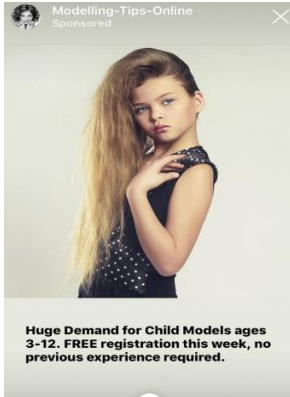
SOCIAL MEDIA GROOMING

Louise O'Hagan, Education Officer, CyberSafe Ireland briefly outlines some of the examples targeting children on social media.

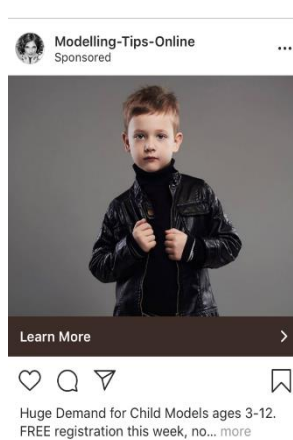
Profiles set up depicting a 12-year-old girl and 10-year-old boy on popular social media sites show evidence for targeting of children through social media. The small selection of images below, presenting daily on legitimate, are examples of the content that lead us to this conclusion. The girl is bombarded with 'become a child model'- targeted ads. When clicked on they ask for photos, and other information to be sent. The 10-year-old boy's profile received some 'become a child model' ads with very different images than the one sent to the

girl as well advertisements to play a game to become “mafia” as can be seen from the images below.

12-Year-Old Girl Instagram



Ten-Year-Old-Boy Instagram



RESEARCHER IN FOCUS

In each of our research bulletins, the CSA-CE SIG will introduce readers to a member who is active in the field. For our second issue, we would like to introduce Dr. Niamh Flanagan, Assistant Professor at Maynooth University.

Dr. Niamh Flanagan



Niamh completed a PhD, under the Department of Children and Youth Affairs scholarship scheme, focusing on the ways that social workers seek and use information to support practice. While her research identified significant differences in the practices that social workers in different settings employ, one of the notable findings was the top-down nature of information in child and family social work settings. In these settings social workers were found to rely more on legislation and policy to inform their practice, than research and evidence. These findings became the impetus behind the establishment of Tusla’s Research and Information Mentor Scheme where practitioners, in a variety of roles, are facilitated to support their colleagues, building research capacity, embedding a research culture, creating the conditions where good research evidence supports practice and building the organisation’s knowledge base (www.tusla.ie/research/research-and-information-mentors).

Moving into academia, Niamh has chosen to focus her teaching on child policy, developing undergraduate education which walks students through the history of child policy in Ireland; guides them through contemporary infrastructures, legislation and policy; and introduces them to national child services with inputs from statutory and voluntary sector practitioners. At postgraduate level policy students are supported to critically analyse local, national and international child policy initiatives.



CRN Special Interest Group on Child Sexual Abuse and Child Exploitation

This bulletin is produced by the Special Interest Group on Child Sexual Abuse and Child Exploitation of the Children's Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Please feel free to share this bulletin. We invite and welcome information about ongoing research, events, podcasts, articles, books, or anything else that is relevant to this network. If you have items you would like included in the next bulletin or have any comments or questions, please contact childrensresearchnetwork@tcd.ie. This bulletin was compiled by Shaakya Vembar Phd Researcher and JP O'Sullivan, Mecpaths.



The objectives of the Network are to:

- Create opportunities for researchers at every level of experience to connect, build networks, and promote and develop their research profile
- Raise awareness of issues relevant to children and young people
- Increase opportunity for research focused / interested practitioners and policy makers to be part of the wider research community
- Support research skill development
- Connect the Network with other relevant groupings and networks
- Pursue activities and collaborations identified by members

www.childrensresearchnetwork.org



Member Benefits

- Further your **knowledge** and keep up to date with developments in **research and practice** with our **workshops, seminars and conferences**. Enjoy discounted rates for members.
- **Publish and disseminate your research** through our communication platforms, including the **Children's Research Digest**, our website, newsletters and social media.
- **Collaborate** with fellow professionals in your area of interest through our **Special Interest Group**

- Take advantage of CRN members' access to **events and networking opportunities** available at CRN's host organisation, **Trinity Research in Childhood Centre**.
- Receive our **electronic newsletter**, containing announcements of **CRN news and events**, as well as relevant external notices and key resources.

Join the Network

Annual membership fees

Student / unwaged €15/~£13*

Part-time employed / retired €25/~£23*

Full-time employed €30/~£28*

* *approximate GBP conversion*



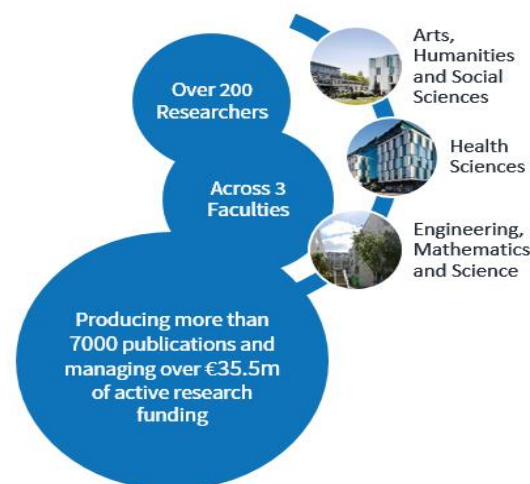
Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
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**Trinity
Research in
Childhood
Centre:**

Home of the Children's Research Network

The Children's Research Network is hosted by the Trinity Research in Childhood Centre (TRiCC)



Established in 2017, TRiCC acts as a research hub for cutting-edge research collaborations on children's health, wellbeing, development and learning across Trinity College Dublin.

"With similar aims to the Children's Research Network, TRiCC brings together researchers working in different disciplines to promote a common endeavour: the production and dissemination of research designed to improve the lives of children on this island and internationally."

Professor Trevor Spratt, TRiCC co-Director
www.tcd.ie/tricc