

## 2. Children as Victims of Sexual Online Grooming

- Understanding Vulnerabilities in order to Prevent



## 2.1 Anna and her Family – Case Study of a Victim of Sexual Online Grooming

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Many children and juveniles experience unwanted sexual online grooming via digital media and the prevalence is increasing steadily. In contrast, the scientific knowledge of sexual online groomers, their typical strategies, the dynamic of the relation between the offender and the victim as well as the escalation of the offending process and the role of parents is scarce. Against this background, this chapter describes a typical case study of a young girl and her parents who contacted Innocence in Danger for help, after the girl was groomed sexually via the Internet and was sexually abused when meeting the offender.

**Keywords:** case study, sexual online grooming of children, child sexual abuse, trauma dynamic

### Introduction

#### Prevalence of sexual online grooming among children and juveniles

Today, many children and juveniles experience different forms of unwanted sexual contact initiations in digital media (Hasebrink et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018; *Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik (PKS)*, 2018; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Ybarra et al., 2004). A study by the *Internet Watch Foundation* (2018) on so-called “live-stream sexual abuse” (i.e., abuse via webcam) demonstrates that 98 percent of children who experienced unwanted sexual contact initiations are 13 years old or younger. In 96 percent of cases, they are digitally abused at home or in their own room. In connection therewith, the 2021 annual report of the Internet Watch Foundation reports that “self-generated” depictions of child sexual abuse found online (i.e., someone captures a recording via a phone or computer camera of children who are often alone in their bedrooms) is the predominant type of child sexual abuse depictions with being part in 70 percent of reports. About two thirds of actioned reports specifically show the sexual abuse of an 11–13-year-old girl who has been groomed, coerced, or encouraged into sexual activities via a webcam (Internet Watch Foundation, 2022). In this context, the so-called sexual online grooming (SOG) represents a prevalent

phenomenon, in which an adult offender aims to establish contact with a minor to sexually abuse him or her (Akhtar, 2014; Stelzmann et al., 2020).

## Vulnerabilities of children and juveniles to become victims of sexual online grooming

Even though SOG is a phenomenon that also takes place in offline environments such as family or pedagogical institutions (Akhtar, 2014; Stelzmann et al., 2020), SOG poses an increasing danger through the widespread of digital media in general and social media in particular (Hasebrink et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018; *Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik (PKS)*, 2018; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Ybarra et al., 2004). Online offenders benefit from the structures of digital media and can thus search for potential victims in order to build up contact with them (Berson, 2003; Eneman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2012). Moreover, to fulfill their sexual gratification, offenders use different strategies to manipulate the child or adolescent (Black et al., 2015; de Santisteban et al., 2018, in this volume, see Schmidt in chapter 3.2; Kuhle & Stelzmann in chapter 3.5). Platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, or TikTok invite everybody to present themselves, even demand it. The search for recognition seems to be a driving force in the digital self-presentation of children and young people. 40 percent of young people between the ages of 12 and 20 say they feel like a nobody if they do not get any likes for a selfie (Hackett, 2017). Jean Twenge (2017) describes these young people as the “iGeneration”, the first generation to spend all their adolescence on a smartphone. According to Twenge (2017), this leads to many wave movements regarding well-being, social interactions, and the way the “iGen” thinks about the world. Twenge (2017) also notes a measurably lower sense of well-being after more hours of screen time and correspondingly less time for analog interaction with friends.

The need of children and adolescents for recognition, their curiosity, their urge to try things out, and their communication behavior cause them to often expose themselves digitally to risks which they cannot recognize due to their development level (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Jonsson et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2007; Whittle et al., 2013, in this volume, see Ioannou & Synnott in chapter 2.2). Hence it is important not to confuse the high digital application competence of children and young people – i.e., the

speed at which they can use a smartphone, for example – with media or even digital literacy.

The ROBERT study (Quayle, Allegro, et al., 2012; Quayle, Jonsson, et al., 2012) interviewed young people (11 to 17 years) affected by SOG and sexual abuse as well as convicted sex offenders who had used SOG as a strategy. Results bring close that under challenging circumstances children are more susceptible to exploiting their need for affection and closeness. For the young people it is a “relief and joy” to have found a person to whom they feel intimately connected. Respondents perceived a person who understands them and is available to them as someone with whom to find a way out of a life where things that were important to them were missing. The interviewees’ reports showed how the perpetrators succeeded in conveying a promise of closeness, accompanied by the possibility of experiencing something exciting, already in the first contact. The youth’s openness to this offer was apparent and reciprocated. Respondents gave many explanations for their desire to get in contact with new people: longing for something new or the urge to become more visible. That included, among other things, sadness since the parents’ divorce, being a little out of school, or being left alone by parents who “felt they had no time for them” (Quayle, Jonsson, et al., 2012, p. 101).

For children and adolescents, seemingly unsuspecting communication can have serious consequences. For instance, experiences of sexual violence have been associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression, substance abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder, and compulsive Internet use. Due to the cross-sectional design of these studies, conclusions about the direction of the effect remain hypothetical, although a reciprocal influence can be assumed (Dönmez & Soylu, 2020; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013; Jonsson et al., 2019).

### Sexual offenders against children using digital media

The MiKADO study commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs shows that approximately 5 percent of a German general population sample stated to have had at least one online sexual contact with children they do not know, and 2 percent reported to have met offline with children. The study goes on to state that online sexual contacts between adults and a child (under the age of 14) lead to sexual abuse of children in 100 percent of cases – if the children agree to meet offline (Neutze & Osterheider, 2015)

Offenders going online and using SOG strategies have a decisive digital advantage compared to offline: direct and completely undisturbed contact with the respective girl or boy to establish and exploit relationships. With the help of a smartphone, perpetrators are always directly connected to their victims. In case of sexual violence or sexual abuse this means that digital or analog sexual violence can no longer be separated. It is all interwoven.

The aforementioned ROBERT study (Quayle, Allegro, et al., 2012; Quayle, Jonsson, et al., 2012) found that chat rooms and instant messengers were the preferred platforms for sexual online groomers for communicating with minors and that there was often migration from one medium to another. The sex offenders interviewed also stated how important it is to have easy digital access to young people. Even if not all of those contacted reacted as desired, the sheer potential of the contacts alone is worthwhile: "It seems, however, that young people were targeted not only because of their profiles but also because of other observed weaknesses, including perceived poor relationships with parents and symptoms that could be considered depression" (Quayle, Allegro, et al., 2012, p. 73).

### Case study "Anna"

The following case study aims at providing a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon of SOG from the perspective of the affected children. The case is about Anna (pseudonym) and her family who sought help and support with Innocence in Danger – Germany. This organization is part of an international network fighting against child sexual abuse, especially sexual exploitation through digital media. It develops a variety of educational and prevention programs for children, young people, parents, and professionals, and it is also active in the training and continuing education of teachers and professionals and conducts its own empirical studies. A key component of its work is crisis intervention in cases of sexualized violence involving digital media.

### Background information

Anna is a 13-year-old girl. She has an older brother. Both children attend a private high school. Anna's brother also spent a year abroad. Anna's parents are both academics and work fulltime in finance. The family lives on the

outskirts of Berlin on their own property. The arts, music, and sports play an important role in their lives. In line with that, both children are being involved in extracurricular activities and lead busy lives. Anna plays music and does sports. At first sight she seems like a well-adjusted teenager, with a sharp intellect and great rhetoric. Digging a little deeper she relates how she was being bullied in school and felt like a total outsider. Anna's mother seems rigid and attaches great importance to her daughter's figure and emphasizes how much weight her daughter gained during the past couple of months. Anna's father is a soft-spoken man, emotionally supportive of his wife.

Anna's mother contacted Innocence in Danger on December 23<sup>rd</sup> in desperate need of support. She described in broad terms how her daughter had been sexually abused: The first contact that her daughter had with the man who sexually abused her was via a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG). Their online contact escalated quickly and resulted in severe sexual abuse (with oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse) twice at Anna's home in her room. Afterwards, Anna was looking for support and had already contacted various organizations. Anna's mother also reported that they had secured parts of the digital communication between her daughter and the offender. In this they required someone to help them make sense of what they had read and to keep their daughter safe over the next couple of weeks.

Anna's parents got a counselor for their daughter at a specialized counseling center concerning child sexual abuse. As they felt that they need more support they turned to Innocence in Danger for crisis intervention. Specifically, they were looking for emotional support for themselves and for support concerning the question of filing a criminal complaint. They were not yet decided and wanted to include Anna in their decision process. Above all, they asked for a moderated conversation with Anna to sort out details and bring them closer together.

### Consultation – Anna's parents alone

On December 27<sup>th</sup>, both parents alone came to the office of Innocence in Danger to talk about their case in more detail. They brought and handed over the digitally secured chat between Anna and an adult man, Otto (pseudonym).

The parents reported how their daughter had met a young man online within an online game. At first, they said, he had been supportive of their daughter in the game. Helping her, praising her, and coaching her. Slowly, he had started chatting constantly using the in-game-chat and later had moved her to WhatsApp and “Line” to communicate more intimately. At that time, Anna was still 12 years old.

Anna and Otto had been in contact for months via messenger and telephone before he visited her at her home twice. Anna believed herself to be very much in love with the young man and had invited him to her house. The parents discovered the sexual abuse when they found a used condom in the trash. At first, they assumed it belonged to their son and confronted him about this sloppiness. Only when he vehemently denied having anything to do with the condom, they confronted Anna and learned about the adult man named Otto.

Immediately they took Anna’s phone and found parts of her chat with Otto on WhatsApp, which they secured by filming it. By doing so, they also read all the communication which shocked and traumatized them. They forbade Anna any further contact with Otto shortly before Christmas and – to be on the safe side – had also taken her smartphone. Both parents were highly agitated, angry, and helpless. Above all, they were very concerned about Anna’s safety as Otto had already been to their home and knew where Anna went to school.

The impression of the consultant was that Anna’s mother was carrying a traumatic life experience of her own. She was absolutely devastated by the perpetrator’s “break-in” into her safe home. She feared for Anna and at the same time was enormously angry with her daughter, who had invited the perpetrator home. During the discussions, it was important to explain the manipulative power of the perpetrator again and again and to make the mother aware that her child may be a smart aleck, but she is still inferior to a strategically acting online perpetrator. It quickly became clear that the mother needed special therapeutic support, which she gratefully accepted.

Anna’s father – also emotionally burdened – was the bridge between daughter and mother during the conflict-ridden time. He succeeded well in supporting both and was able to analyze the case rather rationally. How he is doing now after the verdict is beyond the counselors’ knowledge.

### Consultation – Anna alone

Two days later, the then 13-year-old Anna and her parents came for another appointment. At first, Anna had the opportunity to speak privately to a consultant and talk freely and unaffected by her parents about the previous events.

Anna seemed relieved when her parents left. Asked if she could imagine talking about what she had experienced, Anna affirmed and said that she herself was quite at a loss as to how all this could have happened.

Anna reported that she started playing (the MMOG) during the summer of the same year and had met one of the players, Otto. He helped her a lot with the game, and so they communicated via different messenger services. At that time, she experienced a lot of emotional turbulence as she had been massively bullied in school and had felt sad and alone very often. She had enjoyed how attentive Otto had been towards her and that an already grown man was interested in her. Somehow, she had fallen for him, but in retrospect she reported that she was not so sure anymore whether she had been in love with him or with the idea of being in love with an adult.

Looking back, she felt extremely uncomfortable about how explicitly she had engaged in sexual conversations with him. To her, it felt like that had been her doing, but somehow at the same time she felt like this had nothing really to do with her at all. Anna described how she had felt flattered and seen, on the one hand, and disgusted at the same time. She felt connected to Otto, who actively supported her during the whole period in the game, and did not know how to fend off his sexual allusions. The sexual activities and penetrative intercourse had not been pleasurable to her in any way, even if she pretended otherwise when chatting with Otto afterward. On the contrary, she had been in pain. At the same time she felt like it had all happened to somebody else. This was the same dissociated feeling she had experienced during their conversation leading up to meeting in person. While she had been excited somehow, she felt pressured and uneasy at the same time. She simply had not known how to get out of any of it. To Anna, the whole experience seemed inevitable. Once the train started running, there was no stopping it. She felt incapable of talking to her parents or her brother. And she had not been able to turn to friends or other trusted adults as well.

Anna understood that her parents were worried and disappointed. She herself was also afraid that Otto could show up at school or at home to try and talk to her. She had no idea what he would do now that her

parents knew. Asked what form of support she needed, Anna said she was pleased with her counselor (from another child protection agency) but that she might have questions for the counselor in the event of criminal proceedings. Concerning the following conversation with her parents, she wished for support in reassuring her parents. She did not want to have any more contact with Otto. Her parents needn't worry that she would get back in touch with him again should they return her smartphone. On the contrary, she was relieved it was over now. Nevertheless, she stated that from her perspective smartphone can be used as a weapon. Therefore, she thought it is important to provide proper education about this danger.

### Consultation – Anna and her parents

The consultation session alone with Anna (about 60 minutes) was then followed by a joint conversation with Anna, her parents, and a consultant of Innocence in Danger.

The focus of conversation was on finding binding agreements to guarantee Anna's safety, such as the way home from school, the use of social media, and with whom she interacted. It became clear how shaken all three of them were. The enormity of the abuse had rendered them all speechless in some way. Also, the possibility of filing criminal charges against Otto was discussed. The consultant advised the family to obtain specialized legal support for this decision to understand the course of criminal proceedings in advance and then to arrive at an informed decision. The family agreed to that, and a contact was handed over. Anna and her parents were able to work out some sort of contract concerning her smartphone use, how to get safely to and from school, the impending school trip, etc. It was agreed they would get back in touch if needed.

### Analyzing the sexual online grooming process

Anna was twelve years old when she met Otto online within a gaming community. Through joint activities, they developed a relationship, which gained importance for Anna over some months. Both started chatting via WhatsApp when Anna was 13 years and three months old. At that point, the communication was already highly sexualized. Otto became increasingly explicit in expressing his sexual fantasies and preferences. Anna's answers

and interjections, some of which were also highly sexualized, read like an echo of his words. Due to her age, her cognitive immaturity, and sexual inexperience, she could not truly grasp what it means when Otto fantasized about “getting off in her hot ass” again and again. It is precisely this inexperience that Otto used to expand his sexual fantasies and to desensitize Anna systematically. Furthermore, he repeatedly implied that it was her who wanted this kind of communication and sexual interaction with him. He called her “hooker”, “bunny”, and “fuck girl”. Anna picked these terms up and repeated them. Also, she called him “stallion” once or twice. Otherwise, she chose words like “protector”, “sweetheart”, and “my life”.

It is crucial to bear in mind that communication took place daily and often throughout the day via chat and in time also by telephone. This highlights that smartphone offers offenders permanent unobserved access to their victims. The fact that Otto digitally interacted with Anna in such a highly sexualized way represents not only a preparation for the physical sexual abuse that will take place later but was already an act of sexual violence. A passage of the communication between Anna and Otto reads as follows:

ANNA: Did you dream anything... (unreadable)?

OTTO: Yes, but I'd instead write it to you tonight.

ANNA: Ahhh, something dirty. I dreamt how you played with our first child, I was pregnant, sitting on a chair watching.

OTTO: Yes, there was something hard this morning when I woke up. But your dream is more beautiful.

ANNA: Hihi, if I woke up next to you, I'd have taken care of him.

OTTO: Then I would have woken you up by rubbing the top of its head right against you.

ANNA: And then slipped into me.

OTTO: Blank into your wet hole :-\*

ANNA: Nice and deep.

OTTO: Enough otherwise I massage him

OTTO: want to fuck you

ANNA: I want to ride you

OTTO: Then getting off deep into your pussy

Despite his continuous sexual manipulation over at least three months of their conversation, Anna clearly stated that she did not want to have sexual intercourse at their first meeting. Despite Otto's efforts to weaken her boundaries, Anna remained steadfast:

OTTO: Listen... I really don't know if I can keep my hands off you anymore. I have such a longing for you.

ANNA: You don't have to keep your hands off me, sweetie. I love you

ANNA: Only I don't want sex at the first real meeting.

OTTO: See if we both stick to it. I wouldn't think negatively of you; you don't have to worry about that.

ANNA: Thanks,  Nevertheless, I would like to avoid that

OTTO: I know. I just want you to know. Even if you came right at me right at the door, as we imagined. I'd just think you'd wish all the fantasies to be finally real. I love you more than anything, my dream girl.

OTTO: But I'll touch your ass 

ANNA: Sure,  Let the fantasies (unreadable) come true (illegible). I love you, bunny. Forever and ever.

OTTO: Does licking count as sex :)

ANNA: Hihi, yeah

ANNA: So, sweetheart. I love you. See you later 

OTTO: Too bad... I would love to taste you. See you in the afternoon. Love you

## Further course

In March 2017 later I was contacted again by Anna's parents. They all had decided to press charges against Otto and had gotten in touch with the attorney recommended. They asked for support during their first meeting with the lawyer. The first meeting took place between Anna's parents, the attorney, and a counselor of Innocence in Danger. He explained different proceedings to them which they then took back to discuss with Anna. At this visit, it became apparent how deeply affected Anna's mother was by all of this. She was suffering from PTSD. The counselor recommended going to see a psychotherapist, which she gladly accepted.

In April 2017 later the family contacted Innocence in Danger, saying they had decided to go forward. They were hoping the counselor could accompany Anna to the attorney to make her first encounter easier on her. During this encounter, the attorney asked her in detail about what happened. On basis of her recollections and the chat communication at hand he filed the complaint directly with the public prosecutor's office.

In October 2018 the attorney got in touch with the counselor. The case was slowly moving forward at the court, but in the indictment the appoint-

ed female prosecutor deemed Anna complicit. He asked the counselor to write an expert opinion explaining the psychodynamics in a case like this.

In March 2021 the case was finally tried. By then Anna had turned 17 and was living a year abroad. The court summoned the counselor as an expert witness to establish Anna's psychological stress and possible long-term effects. The defendant was found guilty and sentenced to 3 years in prison and to damages for pain and suffering worth 10,000 Euro. The defendant appealed the verdict. The appeal hearing took place in June 2021 sending him to prison for 2,5 years and upholding the damages for pain and suffering.

### Reflection and practical implications

The case of 13-year-old Anna depicts how easy it is for sexual offenders to contact children and adolescents digitally, to groom and sexually abuse them, and it highlights the dynamics and complexity of SOG. Furthermore, the case demonstrates the challenges that experienced sexual abuse implies for the entire family of the victim. Even though children and adolescents of the iGeneration endowed with digital media literacy with respect to usability functions, many do not recognize risks situation to which they are exposed using digital media. Accordingly, it is improper to assume that smart users automatically have a reflective ability and foresight in context of SOG. This assumption blurs the lines between responsibility and culpability even more. Something that everyone – especially prosecutors and courts, but also counselors and therapists – need to be aware of.

The fact that Anna responded in a sexualized way, sometimes seemingly approaching Otto in a sexualized manner on her initiative, is not to be seen as an invitation or consent to these sexual acts. Due to her age, her emotional and cognitive development, Anna was unable to assess the concrete consequences of her words. Due to being a victim of serious bullying at school, Anna had an increased demand for attention while being emotionally vulnerable to Otto's offer of commitment. Her emotional state and the nature of digital communication made it difficult for her to distinguish between a "good" and a "highly harmful" interaction with an unknown person or to perceive signals of imminent danger at an early stage. Even as the communication and then the meetings lead to painful experiences of abuse, Anna was not able to give up her relationship with Otto. It is precisely this ambivalence that many victims of childhood sexual

abuse describe (Independent Review Commission on the Review of Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p. 34). The desire to maintain the positive parts of the relationship – recognition, affection – is so high that the negative aspects – abuse, exploitation of need – are accepted in order not to lose the person. Those affected do not intellectually weigh up the situation but act purely emotionally.

It is detrimental for counselors, therapists, law enforcement agents, district attorneys, and judges to understand the special dynamics of SOG. Digital media and communication channels are a good means for offenders to manipulate and, above all, to control their victims. Offenders make the most use of the direct digital connection to their victims. They search for victims digitally and/or use the media to intensify an existing contact. They build trust, use blackmail, and not infrequently threaten to disseminate intimate images or even depictions of abuse. In the process, the smartphone becomes their ultimate tool. With a smartphone, the offender can reach any child or adolescent at any time, directly and completely unobserved. No wonder that self-generated child sexual abuse material is on the rise (see Internet Watch Foundation, 2022).

Likewise, it is enormously important to consider the burden on parents and to install support here. In all cases where Innocence in Danger has been asked for help so far, the parents had – mostly – read the harmful chat communication between offender and victim in full. Accordingly, these parents are also highly stressed. They swing back and forth between disbelief, fear, traumatization through words and images, anger, powerlessness, anger at their child, anger at the perpetrator, etc. Therefore, it is important that caregivers are stabilized and receive treatment if necessary.

For the family, the final verdict was an important conclusion after five long years of waiting. Anna has now graduated from high school and is studying abroad. In order to reduce the likelihood of being sexually victimized in digital media, it seems important to raise awareness among minors, parents, and educators for risk situations (Calvete et al., 2021). In this context, several online safety websites have emerged in recent years, providing minors, their caregivers, and educators with safety information and messages and offering educational programs (Davidson et al., 2009). In general, it is recommended that parents, educators, and other caregivers have open conversations with children and adolescents about specific online risks to help them identify dangerous situations and to signal support in the event of sexual abuse – without condemning them for previous

behaviors in the SOG process (for recommendations and an overview of parental and educational handouts, see Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

### Ethical approval

This case study has been conducted in strict adherence to established ethical guidelines for scientific research. The ethical considerations and principles governing this research align with recognized standards and regulations to ensure the welfare and rights of all participants involved (informed consent, anonymity/ pseudonymity and confidentiality, voluntary participation, beneficence and non-maleficence, transparent communication).

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