4.2 Protecting Children from Sexual Online Grooming

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Due to the significance of social media services in young people's lives, the probability of sexual online grooming via these services is increased and should be reduced by knowledge of secure settings. Therefore, preventing sexual online grooming requires knowledge of protective measures as well as competent handling of unpleasant encounters. This article gives an overview of preventive measures for potentially affected children, adolescents, and parents and includes technological approaches to improve the wellbeing of young people. Furthermore, it outlines various educational practice projects developed by the German Awareness Centre klicksafe.

Keywords: prevention, sexual online grooming, klicksafe, social media, sexual abuse

Protecting children from sexual online grooming

All over the world, child welfare organizations are working to protect girls and boys from sexualized violence in real life and on the net (e.g., sexual online grooming (SOG)). Even though young people use the internet preferentially for communication, gaming, exchanging or sharing news, photos, or videos with peers (mpfs, 2018, p. 34), it is no longer an exception that they encounter depictions of abuse, harassment, and SOG on the internet. The anonymity of the internet enables adults in disguise to establish contact with children, to elicit information about sexual matters, and in the worst case to prepare the way for abuse in real life (Gillespie, 2004; Whittle et al., 2013a). The topical spectrum ranges from questions about sexual experience and preferences to explicit prompting of sexual acts.

Sexual harassment of children and adolescents predominantly takes place on platforms that also address adults and, in addition to their public areas, offer private communication functions as found in social media and online games (Gillespie, 2004). Many of these services are inadequately moderated, and their pre-installed settings do not provide sufficient protection for users. Furthermore, intelligent mobile phones have become, for many, an essential part of everyday life (Deloitte, 2018a; Deloitte, 2018b; Ofcom, 2016). Using them brings the popular social media services and communication platforms directly into the lives of children

and adolescents. Practical experiences by the authors with media education of parents, children, and adolescents have shown that very few children and adolescents possess the knowledge necessary for dealing with harassment and sexualized advances (klicksafe, n.d.b). Moreover, younger children in particular are moving about on social media without sufficient technical protection. Many of the popular services are oriented toward interaction and offer options to establish contact – including contact to users who are minors (Common Sense Media, 2009; Kietzmann et al., 2011). All this makes it imperative that children and adolescents get prepared early for the risks that will be entailed in their use of communication services and social media. They need to be taught how they can protect themselves from risky contacts and how it is possible to react when unpleasant encounters occur.

Prevention begins at home – tips for parents

Although young people give the impression of effortlessly grasping the use of online services and mastering the technical handling of devices much more smoothly than their parents can, they fall far behind in their ability to judge the consequences of engaging uncritically with the internet (klicksafe, 2018). Parents, on the other hand, report in personal talks – at parents' meetings or in individual counselling run by the helpline "Nummer gegen Kummer" (English: "Number against sorrow") – that they feel unsure of themselves and out of their depth when it comes to media education for their children, particularly in connection with online acquaintances. Information offerings and counselling can, however, support parents in overcoming their hesitation, learning to recognize warning signals, and integrating protective steps into the everyday upbringing of their children.

More safety on social media

When children are getting to know, and learning to use, popular portals, it is important that they are not left to deal with all this by themselves. Parents should be talking to their kids about it, empowering them and encouraging them to get help if something unpleasant or embarrassing happens. This implies discussing, early on, who can be trusted and where to turn when help is needed. From the outset, young users should also know about support provided by counselling services. In this context, prevention

means escorting children and adolescents along their way, setting up a framework in which it is uncomplicated for them to talk openly about their experiences in the digital realm. It also means teaching children how to behave toward others on the internet. Part of their learning about netiquette is the understanding that they themselves have every right to abruptly break off contact with someone who is not behaving acceptably, who is violating their privacy or their dignity. Their own feelings are reliable indicators, to be taken seriously; children are allowed to say "no" to a situation that makes them uncomfortable. And they should take care not to make others feel uncomfortable: parents should begin exchanging with children at an early age about their right to privacy and about respecting the privacy of others. It is also wise to begin early with explaining to children why photos and videos need to be handled with care and that the persons shown in the images must have control over who is allowed to see them.

This is challenging for parents – to show genuine interest, to have matters explained to them, and to admit that they themselves are not perfect but trying to do their best. One common issue causing conflict in families is the age limit on popular online services. Parents need to be aware that social networks do not ensure sufficient security – for example, when they allow strangers to initiate contact. For this reason, parents should take the age limits that are set by the providers seriously. They should talk with the children about it, arrive at decisions, and establish rules (klicksafe, 2018).

In order to prevent SOG, parents should examine the safety settings closely on every new service the children wish to install. Together with the children, they can discuss the information that is being requested and provided, then adjust the settings on the service to protect that information adequately. Personal data – including name, date of birth, address, and so on – should never be shared publicly or made available to strangers. Even when adolescents are already using social media services on their own, it is still advisable that parents continue to discuss privacy settings with them and repeatedly review the settings together, since it frequently occurs during an automatic update that the software reverts to its default settings. It is sensible to cultivate, together, an awareness of the anonymity of the net and the unfortunate openings this presents for people who wish to conceal their identity and their intentions. A healthy mistrust toward the aims and pursuits of others is a useful tool that parents can teach children to keep at hand when they are online. Overall, it is wise to discuss together which persons the children are allowed to cultivate contact with when they are online (klicksafe, 2018). In general, it is recommended to refuse contact requests

from strangers, to discontinue contacts that are unpleasant while blocking or reporting the offending party, and to seek help whenever indicated. klicksafe provides an overview of the subject area on its website (klicksafe, 2023) and gives concrete prevention tips for educators and parents.

Recognizing sexual online grooming tactics

Timely discussions at home with parents can help children and adolescents to identify warning signals for SOG more quickly and to put up better defences. One element of this is enabling children and adolescents to recognize the typical pitches used by potential abusers, who usually begin with harmless chatter. They try to gain young people's trust by, for example, showering them with praise or compliments, and/or they bait them with unrealistic promises (often coupled with the expectation of becoming famous). Often, the strangers suggest switching over to private chats or messengers where they might ask very personal questions (among other things, about sexual experience) or ask to send intimate photos or engage in sexual conversations. Sometimes these images or conversations are later used for blackmail. Moreover, personal meetings are also tried to be arranged (in this volume, see Schmidt in chapter 3.2; Kuhle & Stelzmann in chapter 3.5).

   Because most potential offenders proceed strategically and deliberately target certain young individuals – chosen due to vulnerabilities or weaknesses observed online –, it is essential that particularly endangered minors receive support from adults (UBSKM, 2020b). These may include children and adolescents who see themselves as outsiders or those growing up in authoritarian family systems or families where violence domnates or sexuality is taboo (ibid.). Furthermore, young girls and adolescents who are prone to taking risks and are receptive to issues of sexuality form an especially endangered target group (Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2001; Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012; Mitchell et al.,2007; Webster et al., 2012; Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2011; for an overview see: Whittle et al., 2013b; Wolak et al., 2008). In order to identify SOG advances early or block them entirely, it is essential that the offender does not succeed in winning the confidence of a young person to the point where he or she keeps the contact secret from those in his/her social surrounding. Offering information and counsel to parents, classmates, and siblings can contribute toward involving persons of trust while calling attention to supportive aspects that can improve the

situation for all those involved – such as emotional stability and approaches to sexuality without taboos (Osterheider & Neutze, 2015, p. 4).

Conversations about the risk for sexual abuse

It is a prerequisite for protecting children and adolescents from SOG that sex education is integrated into an upbringing based on body integrity and sexual self-determination. Learning to acknowledge one's own boundaries and the boundaries of others and understanding what mutual consent means are of the essence. This can help children to identify sexualized advances on the internet more easily, to take their own feelings seriously, and to know how to resist such advances and where to seek help. It is seminal to this approach that prevention is treated as an everyday matter and that parents are "sensitive to the concerns of their children, never subjugating the children's needs to their own" (UBSKM, 2020a). This includes talking to one another about one's feelings, about setting boundaries, or about how secrets are dealt with within the family.

Discussing the topic of self-portrayal on the internet is also a necessity. Parents are advised to negotiate norms for it with their children and also discuss the possible consequences of a portrayal that appears permissive or libertine. In fact, the parents themselves are often in need of education about the manner in which everyday photos (that they or their children post thoughtless) can be sexualized on the internet: placed into a different context and transformed into a violation of the intimate privacy of the persons depicted (Giertz et al., 2019, p. 14). In this context, the authors at jugendschutz.net call attention to the re-use of everyday photos and videos – often those taken at the beach or during sports – by, e.g., persons who attach suggestive comments, create playlists, or disseminate the images in forums.

Another significant aspect is the issue of how parents or guardians treat the topic of guilt and shame. Offenders often rely on the loyalty of their victims, assuming that the latter will not tell anyone what has occurred – especially if the incident was precipitated by risky behaviour on the young person's part (such as posting suggestive photos on social networks). Prevention should not be restricted to simply warning children and adolescents about such mistakes. It also needs to be made clear that even risky behaviour, however short-sighted, is no reason to develop feelings of guilt (UBSKM, 2020a). What is most important for children and adolescents is

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being given the message that they can speak with their parents about SOG or sexual abuse, that they are not the ones at fault, and that their parents will believe them and help them and/or organise professional support.

On the practical level, education about SOG or sexual abuse should be geared appropriately to the age of the child, avoid frightening younger children, and set in when they begin school. Growing up, they should be aware that:

– girls and boys can be exposed to sexual violence on the internet,
– that men, but also adolescents and sometimes women, can be offenders,
– that most adults and adolescents are not abusers,
– that most offenders keep their intentions secret,
– that abusers are often persons one is familiar with and seldom are strangers,
– that sexual abuse has nothing to do with love,
– that abuse often begins with odd feelings,
– that girls and boys can also encounter sexual violence in chat rooms,
– that there can be sexual transgressions among children and adolescents and that in such cases one has a right to receive help (UBSKM, 2020a).

Although prevention cannot provide absolute protection against sexual abuse, it helps in identifying cases early and in terminating contact. Furthermore, well-informed children and adolescents are less susceptible, can size up situations more accurately, and are better able to talk about them (ibid.). Parents can take precautions against SOG through preventative efforts and can intervene more effectively when incidents do occur if they, on the one hand, show understanding for the needs of those who were targeted (by listening and providing support) and if they, on the other hand, have acquired the knowledge necessary for an appropriate response. This could include documentation of proof and filing of legal charges; blocking a user and making a report to the provider or a complaint to a hotline/support agency; arranging professional support or counselling (Pöting, 2019).

Prevention in schools and in youth recreation facilities

Experience in practical work with children and adolescents indicates that they clearly consider the topic of SOG to be of interest and of relevance for their everyday lives. Due to the (pedo-)sexual and pornographic connotations, however, school students have certain inhibitions towards approach-

ing this delicate topic with a closely knit social group – such as their class at school. Moreover, individuals in the class may already have been victimized in some way, so that particular sensitivity is called for in broaching the topic. And if any incident should come to light, intervention methods involving external support and the parents will come to bear.

Initially, it is important to clarify in a matter-of-fact manner the concepts of SOG, cybermobbing, and sexting in order to create a common foundation of knowledge among the students. The typical approaches taken by abusers in SOG need to be discussed in the classroom, along with the prosecutable offences that occur (sexual assault, blackmail, sexual abuse, violation of the right to control one's own image in photos or videos). These issues can form the basis for additional, methodically and didactically structured learning units, permitting various and creative approaches. To illustrate this, several examples taken from media education practice will be presented in the following, including a peer-mentoring approach, a meme-reaction app, work with a topically related film, and an action-oriented method.

Example of prevention measures taken from media education practice

Example 1: P2P approach – developing a "Get Savvy Campaign" for younger students

Campaigns that have been developed in various countries on the topic of SOG can be presented at the outset of the learning unit *Sexting – Risks and Side Effects*; examples and materials are provided in the klicksafe teaching unit *Selfies, Sexting, Self-Portrayal* (Rack & Sauer, 2018, particularly pp. 40–48). The students are then allowed to plan an action of their own – either a short production (e.g., a cell-phone video), a campaign (e.g., a poster), or information material (e.g., a flyer) on the subject of SOG and intended for outreach to younger students as a target group. The whole class takes a vote on which one of the ideas they will implement together in the next step. In general, it is quite productive to have older students informing younger ones in the sense of a peer-mentoring approach as applied, for example, by the Mediascouts (Medienscouts NRW, 2020).

Example 2: Humour puts an end to sexual online grooming – the app zipit

One aim of good preventative work should be to give young people practical options for taking action should they ever become the target of SOG. With the *zipit* app developed by the media education project childline in England, students receive suggestions for memes with which they can respond to explicit advances on social media – and respond authentically in a form familiar to them: with pictures (Childline, 2020). The images can be downloaded from the app's gallery directly into the photo storage on one's own phone. In the event that an undesirable SOG situation comes up, one can send off the meme as a way of terminating the contact early and with self-assurance.

Figure 1:   Examples of the app zipit
Note. zipit app on an iPhone, retr. Feb. 3, 2020

Example 3: Pedagogical work with a film – "The White Rabbit"

The TV film "The White Rabbit" ("Das weiße Kaninchen", produced by the Südwestrundfunk, see ffpnewmedia, n.d.) graphically illustrates the various forms of SOG, from first advances to ultimate dependency from which the victim can no longer escape without outside help. A corresponding classroom unit made available by the Media Competency Forum Southwest enables the analysis of key scenes by suggesting approaches for discussion, such as a focus on the responsibility of others with the question "When and how could others have intervened?" (MKFS, 2020). An exercise on the theme "Everyone has boundaries – how far would you go?" demonstrates to the group that individuals set their boundaries differently, but that all boundaries are to be accepted. Other exercises relating to trust and abuse of trust are also included as part of a comprehensive conception for prevention.

Example 4: Preventive work with the klicksafe materials "Let's Talk about Porn" and "Selfies, Sexting, Self-Portrayal"

Let's Talk about Porn, intended for use in schools and youth work, addresses not only the use of pornography but also the issue of overstepping intimate boundaries and shows up problems associated with sexualized self-portrayals. Here, young people learn to reflect critically about online postings of suggestive self-images (Kimmel et al., 2018, pp. 66–68) and to realistically estimate the risks related to libertine images on the internet. The adolescents make decisions on posting images privately or publicly, give reasons for their decisions, and learn how to proceed when their own private information is published by third parties. One of the many work projects included, the project Sexy Chat, aims at learning how to recognize alarm signals in chat situations that seem suspect and how to react when explicit advances are made. The aspect of anonymity is taken up in a spot on the topic of Cybersex, weighing the issues of anonymity and identity on the net – and the associations triggered by nicknames, as in Figure 3 (cf. short video at Veiliginternetten, 2001).

Figure 2: Which of the pictures are okay?

Note. Screenshot from *Let's talk about Porn*.

*Figure 3: Who's behind the nickname: "HardCore Barbie"? Why this person?
Are you sure?*

Note. Screenshot from *Let's talk about Porn*, p. 121.

Another instruction package called *Selfies, Sexting, Self-Portrayal* includes a section on teenagers' idols, casting them as rather questionable role models that can induce children and adolescents to post sexualised images of themselves (Rack & Sauer, 2018, pp. 24–25). In a reflexive process, they consider the extent to which they allow themselves to be influenced by such misleading role models in their own representation of themselves.

Figure 4:   Steeled body, erotic pose – how role models of many young people present themselves in profiles

Note. Instagram images Cristiano Ronaldo and Selena Gomez, retrieved on July 3, 2017. Screenshot from *Selfies, Sexting, Self-Portrayal*, p. 24.

Example 5: Classroom poster "Warning Signals in Chats"

With the classroom poster "Warning Signals in Chats", children and young people can be sensitised for SOG so that they can stop a riskful conversation early at the beginning. Examples show which strategies offenders use to get in contact to children and adolescents and gain their trust. It can be used to discuss the topic in class. Young people can evaluate the tips according to usefulness and add their own experiences and strategies for checking problematic communication and can thus benefit from shared knowledge.

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Figure 5: Warning Signal in Chats

Note. Translated Screenshot from https://www.klicksafe.de/materialien/wehr-dich-gege
n-sexualisierte-gewalt-im-netz-warnsignale-im-chat (new poster version).

Example 6: Blocking undesirable advances by modifying user settings – for
example on WhatsApp

There are several privacy features in WhatsApp that can be used to install
in order to shield children and adolescents from SOG (for detailed infor-
mation, see https://gabb.com/family-resources/is-whatsapp-safe-for-kids/):

Protecting oneself with secure settings

To provide as little information about oneself as possible to strangers,
one can adjust data protection settings so that access to the profile photo,
personal information ("about"), status ("last seen"), etc. is denied to anyone
who is not listed as a contact in the personal phonebook or to nobody. Set-
tings include a range of options between "Nobody" and "Everyone". In this

context, it is important that children and adolescents select their contacts judiciously, listing in their phonebook only persons they actually know. This kind of contact 'housekeeping' for one's own protection requires a certain maturity and the ability to foresee consequences – things that children first need to be encouraged to learn.
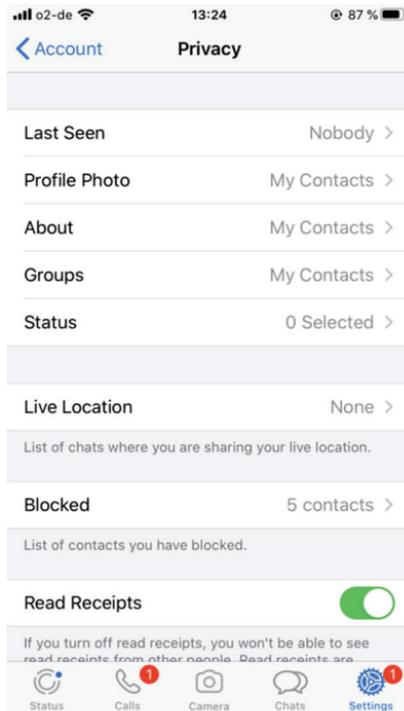

Figure 6: Privacy settings in the IOS system

Fingerprint lock

The fingerprint lock feature allows users to open WhatsApp with their fingerprint and thereby increases security that only the corresponding user is able to access the messages.

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(Live) Location function should be disabled

User can post their current location as an element in a message or can share their current location over a self-defined period of time, as a kind of 'live broadcast'. This option should not be chosen within groups that include strangers, since sharing location data facilitates stalking – which is frequently an element of SOG.

Perspectives

To a great extent, the internet is an anonymous space that enables individuals to assume false identities. Particularly in chats, messengers, and other digital locations that facilitate communication in separate areas (such as private chats), this anonymity presents considerable dangers. Preventative efforts undertaken by parents, schools, and youth workers attempt to prepare young people for the SOG pitfalls they are likely to encounter, and to provide them with tools for self-protection that can be used in an emergency. In order to prevent online victimization, much needs to be done: gender- and age-specific measures, programmes addressing self-assertion and the right to draw boundaries in the virtual world. Addressing these topics in the classroom can help older children and adolescents to become knowledgeable about potential consequences and to learn about being proactive in matters of prevention and intervention.

For younger children of pre-school and primary school age, other measures are indicated: digitally protected areas screened off by technical shields play a significant role, along with parental supervision and concern. An equally important preventive measure is adequate sex education in accord with the children's age and development, but also matter-of-fact information on the topic of sexual abuse.

The national German Awareness Centre klicksafe as an initiative of the EU, coordinated by the Media Authority of Rhineland-Palatinate and the State Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia, sees it as part of its mandate to inform various target groups about the safety risks involved in digital communication. This encompasses calling attention to the typical strategies employed in online grooming and sexual harassment and providing support for preventive self-help through offerings designed to empower parents, children, and adolescents to defend themselves against undesirable contact pitches as well as presenting a wide variety of information and teaching units on these topics online (klicksafe, n.d.a).

Since 2004, klicksafe has been pursuing its goal of promoting media literacy and supporting users in handling the internet and digital media competently and critically by realizing the European "Better Internet for Kids" strategy in Germany. The initiative explicitly addresses multipliers, educators, parents, and guardians by developing pedagogical conceptions and materials.

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