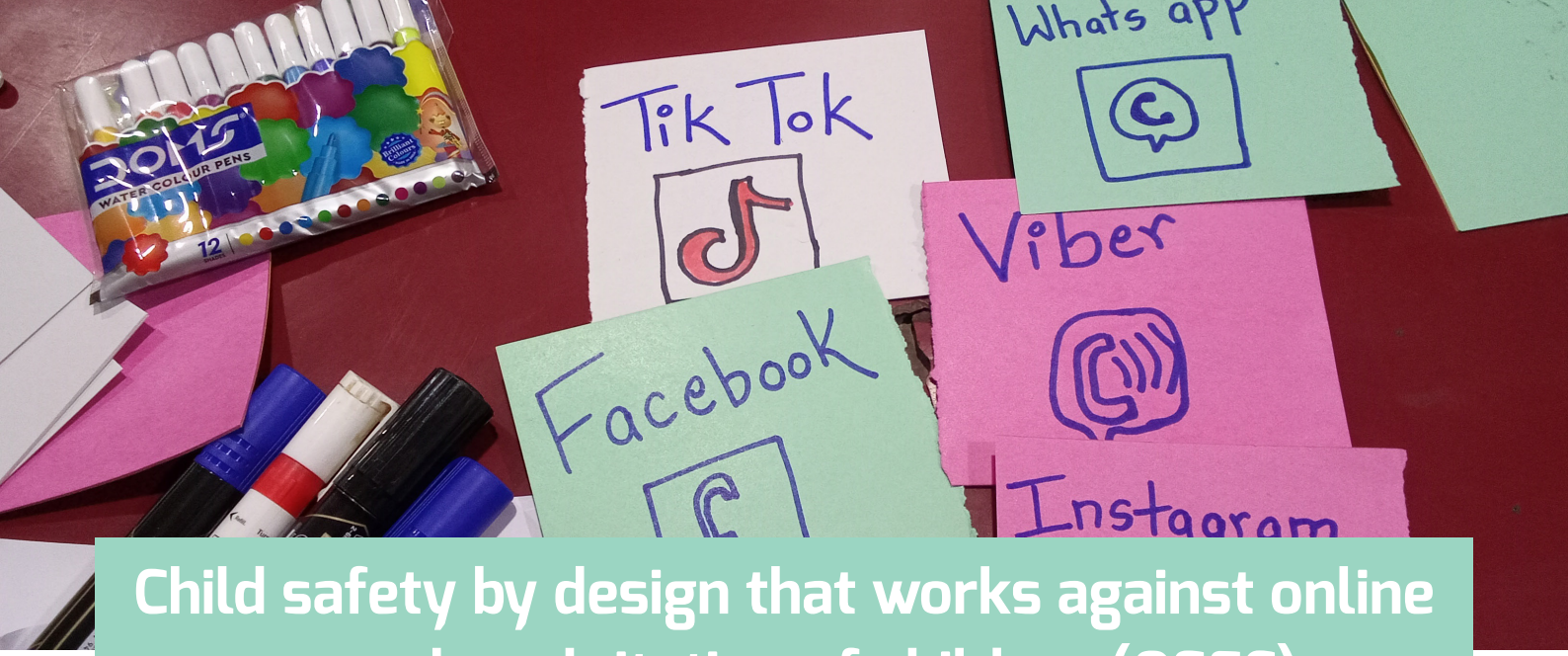

Child safety by design that works against online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC)

KEY FINDINGS AND EVIDENCE-BASED/ CHILDREN INSPIRED SOLUTIONS

A Down to Zero Alliance research

IN A NUTSHELL THIS RESEARCH:

Consulted **141 children** across 10 countries in Asia, Europe and Latin America

Reviewd **151** mostly peer-reviewed **sources**

Consulted **22 international experts**

Identified **9 solutions**, including from children

Produced **5 EU key recommendations**

CHILDREN ARE INCREASINGLY AT RISK OF OSEC

The internet provides a world of opportunity for children and has been a lifeline for many during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also poses a growing risk of exposing children to irreversible harm. Prevalence of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) exploded in 2021, with unprecedented increases in reported cases of grooming, child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), sextortion, and other abuse and exploitation. People also tend to overestimate stranger danger, whereas online abuse often comes from people the children know. It is harder for children to shut down people they know.

CHILDREN ARE PART OF THE PROBLEM AND OF THE SOLUTION

Children, especially teenagers, are risk-takers and overestimate their ability to cope with risks. Teenagers in particular will **prioritise the social benefits of sharing online over their safety.** They might explore their sexuality by sharing private and at times intimate content. Sexting can lead to harmful behaviour, especially when one person pressures another for content and/ or overlooks consent.

That being said, children can be involved in identifying risks online and learning how to deal with the risks they face. Effective approaches to keeping children safe must recognise that **children exercise agency online.** They can take risks, yet they are also capable of self-regulating their online behaviour as they grow and mature.

"THE CHILDREN THEMSELVES MUST BE RESPONSIBLE FOR BEING SAFE AND USE THE MOBILE [PHONE] AND INTERNET WITH CAUTION." (Focus group, child from Nepal)

OSEC IS CHALLENGING TO TACKLE DUE TO INTERSECTING FACTORS THAT NEED TO BE INCORPORATED INTO APP DESIGN

OSEC does not happen in a vacuum. Its manifestations follow certain patterns. OSEC affects children of all ages, gender and backgrounds. Yet, certain groups are more at risk.

Age affects the way children use the internet, the time they spend online, and the way they use social media. Age, development, and maturity affect the risks children face and how they perceive and respond to them.

- Younger children are more at risk of OSEC and online abuse from known family members, peers, and friends than from strangers
- Adolescents crave more agency and privacy. They are actively searching for more connections, because they are seeking validation and acceptance

Design should be tailored to different age groups:

- **Children under 13** can identify some low level risk but they need more monitoring and guidance
- **Children above 13** need more guidance to autonomy and agency, with a focus on self-regulation and self-monitoring - restrictive/ fear-based approaches do not work

Gender norms shape the manifestation of the violence and the risks of victimisation. Adolescents, in particular adolescent girls, are more at risk of grooming and other online harms. Girls are encouraged to be submissive, whereas boys are under pressure to perform assertive hegemonic masculine roles.

Social norms about gender identity and sexual orientation contribute to violence against **LGBTQI+** children, while children with **disabilities** are more likely to experience abuse due to isolation and lack of access to sex education.

Down to Zero
Fighting sexual exploitation of children

PLATFORMS ARE NOT TRANSPARENT ABOUT SAFETY MEASURES IN USE OR THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

Some safety measures are in place on platforms popular among children, but there is a lack of transparency as to the type of measures in place or how they operate. **Current measures are not sufficient** to shield children from encountering potentially harmful situations. Cognitive biases and design tactics are used by platforms to nudge and manipulate users to make risky choices and to share more information.

Designers of online platforms do not have an easy task, as they need to tailor their design to the needs of different age groups, accounting for gender issues, vulnerabilities and conflicting values such as freedom of expression, privacy, building resilience, and protection. The platforms also need to sustain business. Growing user bases and encouraging interaction between users is more profitable than making platforms restrictive.

"EVERYONE CAN LIE ON THE INTERNET AND THAT CAN'T BE CONTROLLED, IT BOTHERS ME THAT PEOPLE CREATE FAKE PROFILES AND ASK YOU FOR NAKED PICTURES AND THOSE THINGS." (Focus group, 13 year old boy from Colombia)

CHILD SAFETY BY DESIGN OFFERS SOLUTIONS THAT COUNTER OSEC

Safety by design is a user-centred approach that puts user safety and rights at the core of the design and development of services and products. These design features can help prevent OSEC as part of a comprehensive set of measures. According to this research, the following safety by design measures can help tackle OSEC:

1. Peer support platforms can provide a safe space for children to deal with risks if they are designed to ensure anonymity and safety while moderated by professionals

2. Intelligent privacy by default should become the industry standard to ensure children's accounts are set to 'friends only' by default, and geo-tagging cannot be done without permission

3. Platforms should provide **retroactive privacy features**, such as the ability to untag, delete, block, and report inappropriate content

4. Age verification and assurance should be strengthened using official, user reported, and third party data, respecting users' privacy

5. Evidence-based computational **risk detection combined with risk mitigation** strategies can help identify risks and prompt children to respond to those risks

"WE NEED MORE VISIBLE REGULATIONS AND SAFETY FEATURES"
(Focus group, 13 year old boy from Estonia)

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER EU POLICIES

1.	**Decriminalise** the exchange of intimate content and material among children	Children should be able to explore their sexuality with peers without criminal consequences
2.	Require platforms to have **effective age verification** systems for all platforms and privacy-preserving age assurance	Age affects how children use the internet; they should access tailored services. Current age verification systems are not effective
3.	Require all platforms to have **transparent reporting mechanisms** and establish **mandatory reporting and referral mechanisms** in the event that a child reports OSEC	Reporting mechanisms are not visible and child-friendly. Children reporting OSEC should be referred to support services and authorities
4.	Make online platforms legally accountable for **minimum safety standards** to keep children safe including a requirement for a child rights impact assessment (CRIA)	Competing objectives lead platforms to prioritise engagement and profit over safety, legislation must intervene and ensure children's rights
5.	Support and strengthen initiatives aimed at **education, awareness, action research** and **offender interventions**	Education is key as it recognises children's need to be online and teaches them digital resilience

Find our research paper: web link. For more information, reach out to n.meurens@tdh.nl.

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