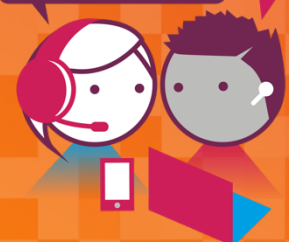


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The experiences of Norwegian youth (aged 9 to 17) with sexual content online

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The experiences of Norwegian youth (aged 9-17) with sexual content online

Summary

This report presents the findings about **Norwegian adolescents' experiences with sexual content**, including how many saw sexual content, what they consider to be sexual content, where they saw it, how they felt about it and whether their experience was intentional or not. The results are based on data collected in 2018 in the EU Kids Online project, with a representative sample of 1001 children aged 9 to 17.

The findings show how **the overall percentage of young people who reported seeing sexual content has decreased** (40% compared to 46% in 2010), the highest decrease being noticed for the younger children (8% in 2018 compared to 20% in 2010 for 9-10 year olds, and 12% for 11-12 year olds, compared to 26% in 2010).

Young people's perceptions of what 'counts as' sexual content vary - some include sexual content that shows people having sex (i.e. pornography), but also images and drawings of naked people (i.e. erotic art). Norwegian children report seeing sexual content via devices connected to the internet, but also on TV, accidental pop-ups, online sharing platforms, or pornographic websites.

On average, boys declared having looked intentionally at sexual content more than girls. Of those who saw sexual content, **more than half declared they felt nothing special**, while girls report being more upset than boys about seeing sexual content (44% versus 18%).

More than half of the 9-12 year olds declare they do not know what they felt about seeing sexual content, indicating that younger children need help in discerning what feels OK and what does not feel OK for them.

Several factors were investigated to understand more which children feel bothered. Girls who have **lower digital skills and who report more restrictive parental mediation** tend to be more upset. However, the most significant predictors of girls reporting being upset were having been **cyberbullied** in the past year and having seen **harmful user-generated content** online (i.e. ways to be very thin, ways to do self-harm).

In terms of **practical implications**, creating spaces where conversations about sexual content and young people's sexuality can happen is paramount for them developing positive attitudes towards sexuality and resilience in dealing with unwanted experiences.

Finally, **addressing poly-victimisation** (i.e. the same children experiencing a range of bothersome, risky or harmful things) is needed in order to protect the most vulnerable children.

Sammendrag

Denne rapporten presenterer funn om **norske barn og unges erfaringer med seksuelt innhold**, inkludert hvor mange som har sett seksuelt innhold, hva de definerer som seksuelt innhold, hvor de så det, hva de følte om det og om erfaringene deres var et resultat av en bevisst handling eller ikke. Resultatene er basert på data som er samlet inn i 2018 av EU Kids Online-prosjektet, med et representativt utvalg av 1001 barn i alderen 9 til 17.

Funnene viser hvordan **den totale prosenten av unge som rapporterte å ha sett seksuelt innhold har sunket** (40% sammenlignet med 46% i 2010), hvor den største reduksjonen er blant de yngste barna (8% i 2018 sammenlignet med 20% i 2010 for 9-10-åringer, og 12% for 11-12-åringer, sammenlignet med 26% i 2010).

Barn og unges oppfatning av hva som «teller som» seksuelt innhold varierer – noen inkluderer seksuelt innhold som viser mennesker som har sex (som for eksempel pornografi), men også bilder og tegninger av nakne mennesker (som for eksempel erotisk kunst). Norske barn rapporterer å ha sett seksuelt innhold via enheter som er koblet til Internett, men også på tv, utilsiktet pop-up'er, online delingsplattformer, eller pornografiske nettsider.

Gjennomsnittlig, oppgir gutter å bevisst ha sett på seksuelt innhold mer enn jenter har. Av de som så seksuelt innhold så var det **mer enn halvparten som oppga at de ikke følte noe spesielt**, mens jenter oppgir å bli mer opprørt av å se seksuelt innhold enn det gutter gjør (44% versus 18%). Mer enn halvparten av 9-12-åringene oppgir at de ikke vet hva de følte om å se seksuelt innhold, noe som kan tyde på at yngre barn trenger hjelp til å skille mellom hva som føles OK og hva som ikke føles OK for dem.

Flere faktorer ble undersøkt for å kunne forstå mer av hva som gjør at barn føler seg plaget. Jenter som har **lavere grad av digitale ferdigheter og som rapporterer mer foreldremediering** har en tendens til å bli mer opprørt. Likevel, den mest signifikante faktoren for jenter som rapporterer å være opprørt er at de hadde opplevd **nettmobbing** i løpet av det siste året, og at de har sett **skadelig brukergenerert innhold** på nettet (slik som måter å være veldig tynn på, måter å skade seg selv på).

Når det gjelder **praktiske implikasjoner**, er det å skape rom hvor samtaler om seksuelt innhold og unges seksualitet viktig for at de skal kunne utvikle positive holdninger rundt seksualitet, samt å være motstandsdyktige i møtet med uønskede erfaringer. Det er også viktig å fokusere på det vi kaller **polyviktisering**, hvor det samme barnet erfarer flere typer plagsomme, risikofylte eller skadelige hendelser. Dette for å beskytte de mest sårbare barna.

Introduction

The concerns around **children's exposure to pornography** and sexual content in the media have been at the forefront of academic and public debates (Tsaliki, Chronaki & Ólafsson, 2014). On the policy level, risk-averse measures have included pushes for more restrictions against pornography, stricter protection and internet regulation.

On the research front, the **effects-oriented paradigm**, has responded to the policy concerns about pornography's effect on children, by focusing on how many children are exposed to sexual content and the harm resulting from said exposure, (although, as Buckingham and Bragg noticed 'research on the effects of pornography, (...) has been almost exclusively conducted with adults' (2004, p.10). Examples provided by EU Kids Online researchers Tsaliki, Chronaki and Ólafsson (2014) include studies on the effect on children's sexual development, attitudes towards sex and women (i.e. the 'objectification' theory) or problematic behaviours in sexual relationships (e.g. Flood, 2009; Peter and Valkenburg, 2011).

However, these correlational studies tell us little, at least not in terms of causal relations or "influences" (Buckingham & Chronaki, 2014; Attwood, Bale & Barker, 2013). Moreover, as Attwood, Bale and Barker (2013) note, the discourse about 'sexualisation' or 'early sexualisation' - which has been at the forefront of concerns about young people's engagement with sexual content online - is rarely used consistently or with appropriate scientific grounding.

A different perspective, that of **cultural studies**, has expanded the debate by bringing insights into how children talk about their experiences, what meanings they attach to those experiences, and how these contribute to the formation of ethical or sexual identities (e.g. Tsaliki, 2011; Chronaki, 2014).

Finally, the **EU Kids Online project** offers evidence-based insight to children's online practices and experiences. The balanced approach towards children's activities online, stemming from a **child-centred, rights-based perspective** allows for a carefully contextualised and nuanced discussion of children's reported experiences (see Livingstone et al., 2011). In this way, the EU Kids Online network countered panicky media discourses that adopted the erroneous stance that risk inevitably equals harm (for example, that exposure to pornography is always something negative) (Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2018).

The EU Kids Online Research: children's experiences with sexual content online

The EU Kids Online project has first collected quantitative data on young people's online activities and risks they encounter in 2010, followed in 2013-2014 by a qualitative investigation into the meanings of problematic experiences online. In 2018, some of the countries from the initial survey, including Norway, collected quantitative data on young people's activities and risks online again, including **their experiences with sexual content and how they felt about it**. In this report, we present and expand on some of these findings.

The 2018 questionnaire had several improvements compared with the one from 2010. One such improvement was providing more response options, considering that young people might feel neutral or even happy about seeing sexual content. Another improvement was asking if it was their intention to see such content or not. What children understand by 'sexual content' has often been adapted to fit adult definitions and thus prone to elicit alarmist positions about the internet being a threat to young people (Tsaliki et al., 2014). Therefore, the EU Kids Online 2018 survey with Norwegian children asked about what they considered 'sexual content'.

In line with the EU Kids Online **balanced approach about young people's exposure to sexual content**, this report argues that concerns should be less about "sexualisation of children" and "pornification" of online content and its supposed effects on young people - but should rather be directed at creating spaces where young people can engage in wanted and consensual experiences. To that end, attention should be directed towards poly-victimisation, taking into account that victimization often does not occur in isolation but is frequently followed by other forms of abuse (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Montiel et al., 2016). That is to say, young people who are more vulnerable to one form of negative experience (e.g. cyberbullying), might also experience other forms of victimisation (e.g. receiving unwanted sexual messages and solicitations).

Finally, research with adults suggests that a **wider range of digital skills are essential for achieving positive outcomes and building resilience** against negative experiences (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018). These measures designed for adults have been adapted for children and adolescents (Livingstone, Ólafsson, Helsper, Lupianez-Villanueva, Veltrin & Volkford, 2017), but still need further testing, in order to assess the cases

in which children experience harm or build resilience (Vandonink et al., 2013).

The recent EU Kids Online report in 19 countries (Smahel et al., 2020) places **Norway above the European average of percentage of children who have seen sexual content online or offline** in the past year (39 versus 33%). However, other countries, such as Czech Republic, Switzerland or Russia report higher scores (Smahel et al., p. 89).

Note on methodology

This report presents research findings about Norwegian children's exposure to sexual content online, including where children see this content, on purpose or by accident, as well as their reported feelings about those experiences.

- A random stratified sample of 1,001 children aged 9-17 who use the internet, plus one of their parents, was interviewed during Spring/Summer 2018 in Norway.
- The data collection was funded from the National State Budget 2017-2018 under the Ministry of Justice and Public Security's Proposition 1 S (2016-2017) and Proposition 12 S (2016-1017) Escalation Plan against Violence and Abuse (2017-2021). The data was collected by Ipsos.
- The questionnaire included items related to young people seeing sexual content online; **locations or devices** where they saw sexual content (both online and offline); and **their feelings about seeing such content** (upset, neutral/OK or happy).
- Furthermore, children aged 9 to 17 were asked a more diverse range of **feelings about seeing sexual content**, including excitement, curiosity, shame, embarrassment or sadness. Moreover, 15-17-year-olds in the Norwegian sample were asked what they considered to be sexual content (multiple answers possible). Finally, children were asked about their **intentionality** with regard to seeing sexual images online (whether they saw it by accident or on purpose).
- For the entire national sample, 'children' refers to internet-using children aged 9-17. 'Using the internet' includes any devices by which children go online and any places in which they go online.
- In the overall classification of risks, the EU Kids Online framework distinguishes between risks related to **content**, where children are recipients of mass-distributed **content** (e.g. pornography) and risks related to **conduct**, where children are actors in peer interactions and exchanges (e.g. sexting) (see Table 1 for exemplars).
- As in the case of other cross-sectional studies, claims about inferring causation should be carefully considered and integrated within the wider relationship dynamics and social contexts young people live in.

Norwegian young people and their experiences with seeing sexual content - summary of main findings

In total, **41% of children aged between 9 and 17 say they have seen sexual images (online or offline). This represents a decrease of 46% since 2010.** The experience varies from 8% of 9-10-year-olds to 77% of 15-17-year-olds.

- Twenty per cent say they have seen sexual images at least every month via a mobile phone, computer, tablet or similar device, while 15% have seen sexual images on TV or film. 22% have visited a porn site, and 13% say they have done so at least every month.
- Amongst the children who have seen sexual images during the past year (n=402), 21% report that they have often (at least every week) seen sexual images on porn sites, defined as sites containing adult content/sites that are forbidden for children. 8% say they have seen sexual images on such sites at least every month, while 48% say they have never done this. **58% of older boys have visited porn sites at least every month, compared to 9% of girls from the same age group.**
- Among the 402 children who have seen sexual images online, most of them report that **they felt nothing special (53%)** when they saw sexual images. More boys report positive feelings than girls (25% versus 7%) when seeing sexual images, and more girls report being upset to a small, somewhat or large degree (44% compared to 18%).
- **Other feelings** associated with these experiences included curiosity (20%), embarrassment (16%) and excitement (12%). Of these, boys are most likely to have felt curiosity or excitement, while girls are more likely to have felt embarrassment. **Overall boys express far more positive reactions than girls.**

More than half of the 9-17-year-olds said they

felt nothing special

when seeing sexual content

Table 1: Risks relating to children’s internet use (exemplars only)

	<i>Content (Receiving mass-distributed content)</i>	<i>Contact (Participating in (adult-initiated) online activity)</i>	<i>Conduct (Perpetrator or victim in peer-to-peer exchange)</i>
<i>Aggressive</i>	Violent/gory content	Harassment, stalking	Bullying, hostile peer activity
<i>Sexual</i>	Pornographic content	‘Grooming’, sexual abuse or exploitation	Sexual harassment, ‘sexting’
<i>Values</i>	Racist/hateful content	Ideological persuasion	Potentially harmful user-generated content
<i>Commercial</i>	Embedded marketing	Personal data misuse	Gambling, copyright infringement

The meaning of sexual content for Norwegian youth

Young people’s own perceptions of what constitutes sexual content is relevant for how they will respond to regulations and rules. Although the response categories were predefined, which in itself limits the study, the responses provide some interesting insights. Firstly, only one per cent did not want to answer, and only 5 per cent said they did not know, indicating that **young people have a clear idea what sexual content means to them**. Second, for young people **it is mostly explicitly sexual content that ‘counts’ as ‘sexual content’**. Table 2 shows the percentages of what young Norwegians consider to be sexual content.

Table 2: Norwegian youth (aged 15-17)’s definition of sexual content, by percentage (2018)

Movies or videos showing naked people participating in some form of sexual activity	79
One or more pictures of naked people	70
Sexual content in movies or videos showing naked people	64
Animations showing naked people	47
Images of one or more half-naked people (such as underwear or swimwear models, celebrities in private moments, celebrities in underwear)	30
Drawings of naked people	12
Something else	4
Do not know	5
Do not want to answer	1

Notes: Children born 2000 to 2002, n=246. Table reproduced from Staksrud, E. (in press).

Although many identified “movies or videos showing naked people engaging in some form of sexual activity” as sexual content, their definition included also “showing one or more half-naked people (e.g. models in commercials for underwear or swimwear, celebrities in private moments / celebrities in underwear), reported by 30% of children, but also “drawings of naked people (e.g. works of art)”, reported as sexual content by 12% of Norwegian children. **This indicates that research and policy arguments directed at protecting children (i.e. from the negative effects on online pornography) should be downplayed and contextualised accordingly.**

Arguments about protecting children from the negative effects of pornography should be downplayed and contextualised

Furthermore, young people were asked about the **places, online and offline, where they saw sexual content**. The most prevalent places were TV, movies and online venues (including mobile devices). From the online places, accidental ‘pop-ups’, photo- and video-sharing platforms are the most common. Table 3 shows where Norwegian children have seen sexual content in the past 12 months.

Table 3: Where Norwegian children (aged 9-17) have seen sexual content in the past 12 months (2018), by percentage

% of those who have seen sexual content...	
In a magazine or book	35
Via a mobile phone, computer, tablet or any other online device	90
On television, film	80
By pop-ups on the Internet	68
On an online photo-sharing platform (e.g. Instagram, Flickr)	59
On an online video sharing platform or site (e.g. YouTube)	52
On a pornographic website (adult or X-rated website)	51
On a social networking site (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)	40
By a message sent directly to me on my mobile phone	31
In an online advert	31
In an online game	25
By a message sent directly to me via my computer	12
By e-mail	1
<i>Some other way</i>	28

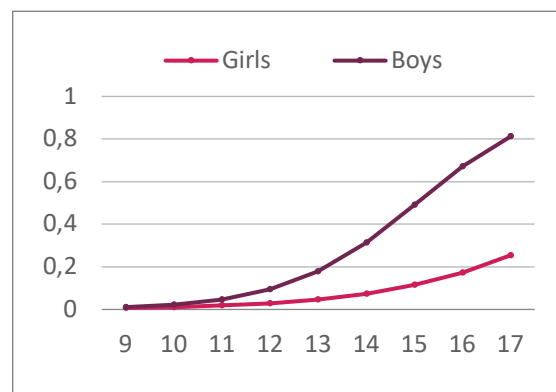
Notes: Figure generated from the 2018 EU Kids Online Norwegian Dataset. Table reproduced from Staksrud, E. (in press).

Over half of those who have seen sexual content (21% of all children) **have done so on a pornographic website**, while one in three, 31% (which accounts for 13% of all children) have experienced having sexual content sent directly to their phone.

Figure 1 shows the **predicted probabilities for girls and boys at different ages seeing sexual content on pornographic websites**. While there are no significant differences between boys and girls up to the age of 12, after 13 years of age, boys report seeing sexual content on porn websites (i.e. an intentional activity) increasingly more than girls at any age (e.g. a 17-year-old boy has a 0.81 probability of accessing porn websites, compared to the 0.25 probability of a 17-year-old girl). However, since

these answers are self-reported, social desirability effects must be taken into account (i.e. girls might downplay their self-reporting of engaging in this activity – as it might be perceived less socially acceptable for them, while boys might report seeing more porn).

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of girls and boys seeing sexual content on pornographic websites at different ages (9 to 17 years old)



EU Kids Online 2018: QF31h: On a pornographic website (adult or X-rated website) [In the PAST YEAR, how often have you seen images of this kind in any of the following ways?] (n=890).

How do young people feel about seeing sexual content?

The questionnaire included items related to how young people felt about seeing sexual content, i.e. upset (a little, fairly, or very); happy; but also neither happy nor upset. Their feelings give an indication about whether they perceive sexual content as bothersome or not.

- First, according to the recent EU Kids Online report (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 135), Norwegian children, although report a high number of risky experiences compared to children from other European countries, **are rather low on the self-reported harm levels** (i.e. children bothered by encountering risks).
- Overall, **younger children** who also have fewer digital skills and who rely more on parental mediation **tend to be more bothered** by seeing unwanted sexual content. Conversely, older adolescents, who have acquired more digital skills and report less restrictive parental mediation are less bothered by seeing sexual content online. Moreover, children who report more self-efficacy, more sensation-seeking behaviour and more risky offline behaviours tend to be less bothered by

seeing such content¹. Table 4 details the distribution by age and gender of children according to their self-reported feelings, i.e. happy, upset, or neither happy nor upset.

More than half of the 9-12-year-olds do not know what they felt about seeing sexual content

Table 4: How Norwegian children felt after being exposed to sexual content online, by age and gender (2018)

	Don't know	Happy	Neither happy nor upset	A little, fairly or very upset
Boys	30	18	40	13
Girls	36	5	31	28
9-10 yrs	53	7	7	33
11-12 yrs	61	0	17	22
13-14 yrs	31	7	28	34
15-17 yrs	29	15	42	15
All	32	12	36	20

Notes: Figure generated from the 2018 EU Kids Online Norwegian Dataset.

Table reproduced from Staksrud, E. (in press).

- Interestingly, one in three **children** (and more than half of the 9-12-year-olds **do not know how to interpret the feelings they had about seeing sexual content** online. Gender differences are apparent as well: on average **girls report being more upset than boys** (28% versus 13%), while more boys report being 'happy' (18% of boys versus 5% of girls).
- Furthermore, a follow-up question brought more nuance to our understanding of young people's feelings. **Most of them (42%) declared they felt nothing special** (this, however, might be a

typical deflecting response mechanisms of young people when faced with inconvenient questions).

- Equally interesting gender differences were revealed for the remainder of the response options, with **girls reporting more feeling embarrassed, angry, fearful or helpless** to a larger degree than boys, whereas **boys expressed more curiosity, excitement and cheerfulness**.
- One explanation for these gender differences could be related to the **intentionality** of the experience - an unwelcome surprise versus an active search. Another explanation could reside in the **internalised notions of 'appropriate femininity'**, which prevents women/girls from appearing too interested or actively exploring and expressing their sexuality (Ringrose, 2011).

Table 5: Stated feelings of Norwegian children after seeing sexual images (on- or offline), by gender 2018

	Boys	Girls	All
I felt nothing special	39	46	42
Curiosity	25	13	20
Embarrassment	9	25	16
Excitement	16	6	12
Shame	9	8	8
Cheerfulness	10	1	6
Anger	2	9	5
Humiliation	5	4	5
Fear	2	6	4
Sadness	4	3	3
Helplessness	1	4	2
I don't know	14	6	11
Prefer not to say	8	3	6

Notes: Figure generated from the 2018 EU Kids Online Norwegian Dataset (n=402).

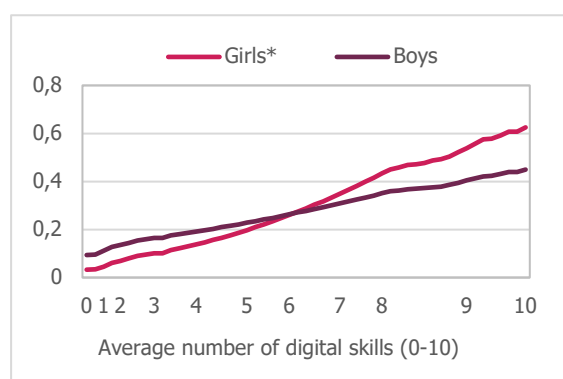
Table reproduced from Staksrud, E. (in press).

Next, we took a closer look at children who declared that **they felt nothing special and checked for the effect of digital skills** (as digital skills are considered to be a factor that mediates against the experiences of harm, cf. Livingstone et al., 2011).

¹ See Tables 8 and 9 in Annex for bivariate correlations.

The regression model shown in Figure 2 was significant only for girls, meaning that a girl with a maximum score (10) for digital skills has more than double the probability to say that she felt nothing special than a girl who had a score of 5 for digital skills (a 0.62 chance versus 0.28).

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities for girls and boys to declare that they felt nothing special according to their digital skills (9 to 17 years old)



EU Kids Online 2018: NO_op_QF33j_rt: I felt nothing special [And the LAST TIME you have seen images of this kind, did you have any of these feelings?] (n=377).

Furthermore, a follow-up question related to the **intentionality of seeing sexual content** was asked (if they saw sexual content online and whether it was their intention or not to see it). Again, boys state to a higher degree than girls that it was their intention to see the sexual content in question.

Table 6: Intentionality of seeing sexual images online among Norwegian children, by gender (2018)

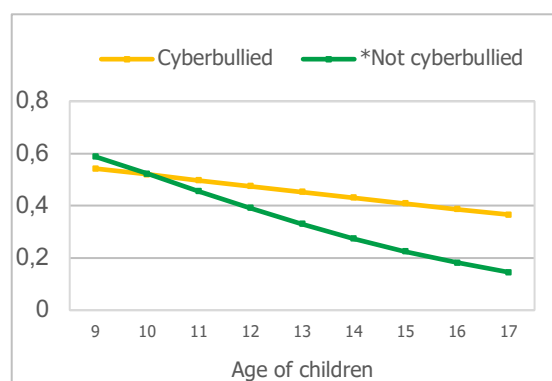
	Seen this type of content (all)	Saw this material because they intended to see it	
		Boys	Girls
A sexual image or video of someone naked	78	63	20
A sexual image or video that shows someone's 'private parts'	68	58	15
An image or video that shows sexual acts or people having sex	65	65	20
An image or video that shows sexual acts in a violent way	17	7	3
Something else sexual	31	22	11

Notes: Figure generated from the 2018 EU Kids Online Norwegian Dataset. Table reproduced from Staksrud, E. (in press).

Which children are upset about seeing sexual content?

Finally, we wanted to see **which children were upset by seeing sexual content** and how this related to other factors, especially **cyberbullying and other negative online experiences** (in line with the poly-victimisation theory - Finkelhor et al., 2007; Montiel et al., 2016). Figure 5 below shows the predicted probabilities for children of different ages to declare that they were bothered (upset) by seeing sexual content, and how this relates to them having been treated in a mean way online in the past year.

Figure 5: Predicted probabilities for young people to be upset by seeing sexual content in relation to having been cyberbullied in the past year (9 to 17 years old)



EU Kids Online 2018: QF20-21: In the PAST YEAR, has anyone EVER treated you in such a hurtful or nasty way? Via a mobile phone or internet, computer, tablet, etc. [In the PAST YEAR, how often did this happen in any of the following ways?] (n=899). QF32: Thinking of the LAST TIME you have seen images of this kind, how did you feel about it? (n=377).

- Interestingly, there are **significant differences between children who have been bullied and those who have not been bullied** with regard to their reporting of being upset about seeing sexual content. Those who have been treated in a mean way report, on average, being more upset at all ages (with the exception of 9-10-year-olds who report the same high levels of being upset, regardless of having been cyberbullied or not). The differences increase with age, a 17-year-old who has been cyberbullied has a 0.36 probability of being upset, compared to the 0.14 probability of being upset for a 17-year-old who was not cyberbullied).
- Furthermore, **children who have been cyberbullied report the same levels of being upset at all ages** (i.e. there are no significant differences between younger and older children who have been cyberbullied).

Since more girls on average report being upset about seeing sexual content, we looked more closely at different factors which might interact with this. The hierarchical logistic regression model in Table 7 shows the relative impact of digital skills, risky offline behaviours, enabling parental mediation (e.g. talking to children about the things they see online), cyberbullying (having been treated in a mean or nasty way online in the past year) and exposure to negative user-generated content, on girls' reported feeling of being upset by having seen sexual content.

Table 7: Logistic regression predicting being upset about seeing sexual content for girls (9 to 17-year-olds)

	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.176	1.191	8.764	0.008	0.813	1.363	2.357	0.032	0.106	1.512	1.174	0.916
Digital skills score (0-10) by age (centered around 13 years old)	0.000	0.017	0.983	0.005	0.000	0.015	0.915	0.018	0.000	0.022	0.978	0.053
Risky offline behaviours by age (centered around 13 years old)	0.025	0.016	0.975	0.112	0.051	0.019	0.951	0.019	0.051	0.019	1.051	0.007
Enabling parental mediation by age (centered around 13 years old)	0.034	0.022	1.034	0.854	0.043	0.022	1.043	0.224	0.044	0.022	1.044	0.044
Number of types of negative user generated content encountered									0.326	0.123	1.386	0.008
Cyberbullied									1.094	0.037	2.987	0.042
-2 Log likelihood	140.183				133.848				118.53			
Cox & Snell R2	0.036				0.093				0.217			
Nagelkerke R2	0.048				0.124				0.29			

Note: *B* = logit; *SE* = standard error of *B*; *OR* = odds ratio; *p* = significance. Variables with significant effect have *OR* in bold.

In the final model, the most significant factors predicting the likelihood of girls being upset by seeing sexual content were: (a) having been treated in a mean way online (cyber-bullied) and, (b) overall exposure to negative user-generated content (e.g. ways to harm or hurt oneself, ways of committing suicide, ways to be thin or gory/ violent content). Notably, the most important factor was **cyberbullying, with girls that reported having been treated in a mean way being almost 3 times more likely to also be upset about seeing sexual content online**. Other factors, such as the level of digital skills or enabling parental mediation had a very small impact - those who engage in risky offline behaviours displaying slightly more resilience (less chance of being upset by 5%). Finally, older girls who report more parental mediation were slightly more likely to be upset (by 5-6%).

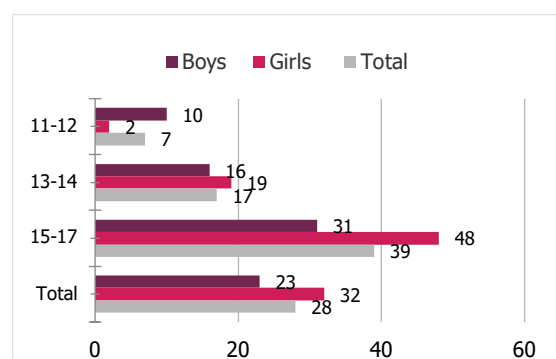
Young people who report being cyberbullied are also more upset about seeing sexual content

The need for reliable information about sexuality

The Norwegian questionnaire had additional items about the young people's need for information regarding sexuality and safer sexting practices (Patchin & Hinduja, 2019).

- 28% of the 11 to 17 year olds sample and 39% of 15-17 year olds have seen at least monthly (or more often) information or discussions online where people talk about sexuality (not pornography). As expected, the exposure for information about sexuality is age-dependant, with significant differences between boys and girls as they step into late adolescence. Figure 3 shows the age and gender distribution:

Figure 3: Percentage of adolescents who have seen information or discussions about sexuality (not pornography) at least monthly in the past year (11 to 17 years old)



EU Kids Online 2018: m4_1c: Information or discussions about sexuality (not pornography) [In the PAST YEAR, how often have you seen websites or online discussions where people talk about or show any of these things?] % of 11 to 17 year olds who have seen this at least every month (n=616).

- Furthermore, the need for reliable sexual information was expressed by 21% of 11 to 17

year olds who reported having been in need of advice about sharing sexually explicit images of themselves at least monthly in the past year. Those who stand out are 13-14 year old girls:

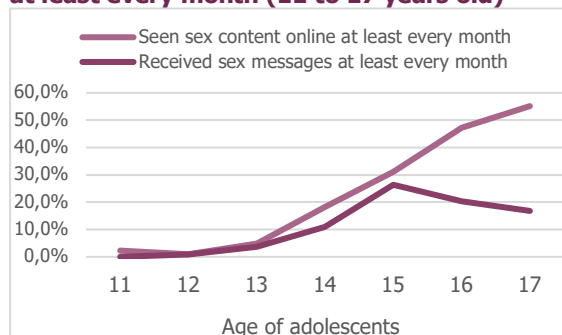
Figure 4: Percentage of adolescents who needed advice about sharing sexually explicit or nude images online at least monthly in the past year (11 to 17 years old)



EU Kids Online 2018: m3_1c: Advice about sharing sexually explicit or nude images online [In the PAST 12 MONTHS, how often did you find yourself in a situation where you could use the following advice?] % of 11 to 17 year olds who have needed this at least every month (n=655).

- Finally, a combined distribution of adolescents 11 to 17 years old who have received sexual messages² and have seen sexual content at least every month shows that this is not necessarily a linear relationship. As in the figure above, after 13-14 years of age and 15 years old in particular seem to be critical times when young people start engaging more in sexual communication online, come in contact with sexual content and reportedly, are in need of more support.

Figure 5: Percentage of adolescents who have received sexual messages at least every month / who have seen sexual content online at least every month (11 to 17 years old)



EU Kids Online 2018: Q40-41: In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER RECEIVED any sexual messages? This could be words, pictures or videos? How often have you received such messages? % of 11 to 17 year olds who have received sexual messages at least every month (n=658). Q30-31c: In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER SEEN any sexual images? Via a mobile phone, computer, tablet or any other online device [In the PAST YEAR, how often have you seen images of this kind in any of the following ways?] % of 11 to 17

² Questions related to sexual messages were not asked of younger children (9-10 year olds).

year olds who have seen sexual content this way at least every month (n=689).

Conclusions and recommendations

This report presented recent research findings about **Norwegian children's exposure to sexual content online**, including where children saw this content, whether on purpose or by accident, as well as their reported feelings about those experiences. The analyses in this report draw on the data collected within the **EU Kids Online project** in Norway during Spring/Summer 2018 with a random stratified sample of 1,001 children aged 9-17 who use the internet, and one of their parents. The **child-centred, rights-based perspective** adopted by the EU Kids Online research framework, which balances risks and opportunities, allows for a contextualised and nuanced discussion of children's experiences (see Livingstone et al., 2011). In this way, the EU Kids Online network aims to counter panicky media discourses that adopts the erroneous stance that risk inevitably leads to harm (for example, that exposure to pornography is always something negative) (Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2018). To that end, this report presents an evidence-based account of children's exposure to sexual content, the meaning they attach to said content, their intentionality of seeing it and their reported feelings. It also presents young people's need for accurate information about sexuality and safe sexual expression practices.

First, the overall **percentage of young people who reported seeing sexual content has decreased** (40% compared to 46% in 2010), indicating that alarmist messages about young people's increased exposure to pornography are not correct. Secondly, **what counts as 'sexual content' for young people differs** - while many include sexual content that shows people having sex (i.e. pornography), some also include images and drawings of naked people which can constitute erotic art or sexual education material. **This is another way to say that not all sexual content children see online is 'pornography'**.

Next, young people **developing digital skills** in order to safely navigate online spaces needs to be supplemented with other tools (e.g. critical thinking, tools for emotional resilience, emotional and relationship education) to enable them to deal with negative experiences. As advocated elsewhere (Barbovschi & Staksrud, 2020), a new set of skills which combine all these could constitute **"digital sexual and relationship skills"**. Furthermore, **more girls than boys reported feeling bothered**, indicating that exposure to sexual content was an unwelcome, unwanted experience.

Some of the unwanted content might have come from accidental exposure, some might have been sent on purpose by someone else. Results show a connection between being bothered by sexual content and other negative experiences (e.g. cyberbullying, negative user generated content), indicating that some children experience **poly-victimisation** (i.e. the same children experiencing a range of bothersome, risky or harmful things). Addressing the factors that make some children more vulnerable than others to multiple negative experiences is a crucial next task.

Finally, taking into account that **some children see sexual content intentionally** it is important to create spaces where children can talk about what they see and what it means to them in a supported and safe way. A number of adolescents expressed

the need for advice about sharing sexually explicit images and have access sites with discussions about sexuality. Therefore, providing accurate and age-appropriate information about sexuality and sexual expression, including the way these are depicted in media is extremely important. In the absence of **comprehensive sex and relationship education programmes**, children will rely on what is available to them (i.e. solely pornography for sexual content or peer examples when it comes to sharing sexual messages). The answer is neither in curtailing access to information nor in policing young people's sexual exploration (which leaves them vulnerable and unprepared for risky and unpleasant situations), but rather in offering them reliable sources of information, guidance and support.

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Annex

Table 8: Correlations between frequency of seeing sexual content on various locations^a, on pornographic sites, feelings about seeing sexual content and different measures of online activities and skills, and two types of parental mediation (all children 9-17)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Frequency of seeing sexual content on different locations (N=376)	1			
2. Frequency of seeing sexual content on porn websites (N=359)	.659**	1		
3. Upset about seeing sexual content (a little, fairly and very upset) (N=244)	-.334**	-.439**	1	
4. Neutral or happy about seeing sexual content (N=244)	.334**	.439**	^{-1b}	1
5. Digital skills total score (0-10)	.185*	.122*	-.217**	.217**
6. Time spent online	.231**	.211**	n.s.	n.s.
7. Enabling parental mediation (N=759)	.205**	-.183**	.202*	-.202*
8. Restrictive parental mediation (allowing for certain activities online) (N=756)	-.172*	-.134*	.228* *	-.228**

Notes *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed);

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

^a Children were asked if they have seen sexual images in the past year on several locations, including on TV/movies, on a video platform, on pornographic website, on any device e.g. mobile phone, tablet, but also by accident (pop-ups) or messages sent directly to their phone. For each location/platform they mention, they were asked how often they have seen sexual messages, with the response options 0=Never, 1=A few times, 2=At least every month, 3=At least every week, 4=Daily or almost daily. An index was computed to measure the frequency of seeing sexual images on all locations mentioned by children (N=376).

^b The variable 'Upset about seeing sexual images' was computed from the variable QF_32: Thinking of the LAST TIME you have seen images of this kind, how did you feel about it? With recoded responses 0= from 'I was happy' and 'I was not happy or upset', and 1= from response options I was a little, fairly or very upset. The variable Happy or neutral about seeing sexual images was the reversed variable 'Upset about seeing sexual images'.

Table 9: Correlations between harm from seeing sexual content on various platforms, neutral or positive feelings about seeing sexual content and different scales (all children 9-17)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Upset about seeing sexual content (a little, fairly and very upset)(N=244)	1		
2. Neutral or happy about seeing sexual content (N=244)	-1	1	
3. Felt nothing special about seeing sexual content (N=377)^a	-.322**	.322**	1
4. Sensation-seeking scale ^b (N=965, Range 1-4, M=1,63. StD= 0,77)	.236**	.236**	n.s
5. Risky offline behaviours ^c (N=975, Range 0-4, M=0,34, StD=0,75)	.201**	.201**	n.s
6. Self-efficacy ^d (N=952, Range 1-4, M=2,68, StD=0,69)	-.174*	.174*	n.s.

Notes *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed);

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

^a The Norwegian children were asked additional questions in relation to seeing sexual content, including a set of questions about more diverse feelings in connection to seeing sexual content, such as shame or embarrassment. One of these feelings was 'I felt nothing special', with 0=No and 1=Yes as response options (N=377).

^b Sensation-seeking scale computed from items 'I do dangerous things for fun' and 'I like to do fun things, even if they are dangerous', adapted from Stephenson, M.T., Hoyle, R.H., Palmgreen, P. and Slater, M.D. (2003) 'Brief measures of sensation seeking for screening and large-scale surveys', *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 72(3), 279-86; Ch.Alpha=.860

^c Risky offline behaviours – the children were asked the child was asked whether or not (yes/no) he/she had carried out the following four activities in the past year: 'Had so much alcohol that I got really drunk', 'Missed school lessons without my parents/ carers knowing', 'Been in trouble with my teachers for bad behaviour', 'Been in trouble with the police'. The number of 'yes' answers were added up. Ch. Alpha=.647, adapted from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey; Currie et al., 2008.

^d Self-efficacy scale was computed from items [How true are these things of you?] 'I can solve difficult problems if I try hard enough', 'If someone opposes me, I can find ways to get what I want', 'It is easy for me to stick to my aims and achieve my goals', 'I am confident that I can deal with unexpected problems', 'I can generally work out how to handle new situations', 'I can solve most problems if I try hard', 'I can stay calm when things get difficult because I am good at coping', 'When I meet a problem, I can usually find several solutions', 'If I am in trouble I can usually think of something to do', with options 1=Not true for me, 2=A bit true for me, 3=Fairly true for me, 4=Very true for me, Ch. Alpha=.922, adapted from Schwarzer & Jerusalem (1995).