



BUILDING A SAFE INTERNET

SO YOUTH CAN CONNECT, LEARN, LOVE, AND THRIVE

Building a Safe Internet so Youth Can Connect, Learn, Love, and Thrive

Children deserve safe environments where they can connect, learn, love, and thrive both off and online. Advances in technology have sparked positive, new opportunities for children to grow. However, they have also opened the door to serious threats and profound harms to children's safety and wellbeing.

Rather than improving with time, these problems are worsening at an exponential rate, with the Internet Watch Foundation reporting 2021 as the worst year on record for online child sexual exploitation.¹

The scope and magnitude of the dangers may seem daunting. But change is possible if every one of us fights to secure a safer, more joyful future for our children.





How Sexual Harm to Children Happens Online

1. Predators Gain Access to Children

Social media apps,² gaming platforms³ and other interactive technologies⁴ are major avenues by which predators gain access to minors for purposes of sexual abuse and exploitation. Illustrating this point, an analysis of U.S. sex trafficking cases active in 2020 found that the most common means by which sex traffickers accessed victims was the Internet, and that 65% of child victims recruited via social media were recruited on Facebook, 14% on Instagram, and 8% via Snapchat.⁵ The access predators have to children through technology also facilitates “online enticement”—that is, predators communicating with children with the intent to produce child sexual abuse material and/or livestream child sexual abuse.⁶

Abusers can initiate relationships with children via:



social media



gaming platforms



other interactive technologies

Further, a 2020 quantitative research study found that **1 out of 3 youth aged 9–17 reported having a sexual interaction on social media** such as being asked for a nude image or video, being asked to go “on cam” with a nude or sexually explicit stream, being sent a nude photo or video, or being sent sexually explicit messages. **One out of 4 youth reported having a sexual interaction with someone they believed to be an adult.** ⁷

Many social media apps and other interactive technologies make it very easy for adults to access children through direct messaging—a popular tool for grooming as it allows for private communication. Apps also frequently allow adults to “comment” on children’s posts, another avenue predators exploit to begin grooming children. Some social media apps may even “recommend” minors to adults as potential contacts through algorithms that suggest content and accounts to adults seeking to find children.

Often posing as children, predators use information children post on social media to identify vulnerabilities, create connections, and access entire networks or groups of children. Predators will often shower minors with attention and praise, and then encourage them to move their communications to more encrypted or “private” platforms like Snapchat or WhatsApp. They then convince children to send sexually explicit images to use as extortion/blackmail (sexual extortion) for additional demands—including to meet in person (for the purpose of sexual abuse in person or for selling them to others via sex trafficking). These images may then be shared with other predators and/or distributed or sold on pornography and prostitution sites like Pornhub and OnlyFans or sites that allow pornography such as Twitter and Reddit.

Additionally, sexual predators may utilize “clickbaiting,” a practice that involves sending a child seemingly harmless links which if clicked, install spyware on their computer. This allows the predator to control the child’s computer and to activate the child’s webcam without them even knowing it.

“When I was 15, I was groomed online by a man in his 30s (I thought he was my age when I met him). I met him on an app to meet other teenagers as I was very lonely, he found me, and it went on from there. He sexually exploited me for nudes, sexual roleplay, and other things. This lasted for two years. . . .”⁵⁷

Grooming

Online access to children provides sexual abusers the opportunity to groom⁸ them. Grooming is the process of befriending,⁹ building emotional bonds,¹⁰ or using deception,¹¹ bribery,¹² threats,¹³ and sexual extortion.¹⁴ of children in order to:

- 1) lead a child to perform sexual acts via webcam
- 2) obtain and distribute child sexual abuse images/videos (i.e., child pornography)
- 3) engage in contact child sexual abuse, and/or
- 4) manipulate them into sex trafficking.¹⁵

Researchers for the Online Grooming Communication Project found that **children could become victims of online grooming in as little as 17 minutes.**¹⁶

Tools of Online Sexual Exploiters

- Direct Messaging
- Comments
- Algorithm Recommendations
- Fake Profiles
- Encrypted Messaging Apps
- Clickjacking & Spyware
- Inactivated Safety Features



2. Pornography Exposure Abuse

A lack of or incorrect set up of filters or safety setting on devices (including school-issued electronics) or apps leaves children at risk for viewing hardcore pornography,¹⁷ exposing them to the extreme, violent, degrading, abusive, and racist depictions of sex acts in mainstream pornography,¹⁸ disrupting natural child sexual development, and serving as the first or primary “education” about sexual relationships. Childhood pornography exposure, a form of child sexual abuse, is also a major catalyst for child-on-child harmful sexual behavior.¹⁹



Fig.1 In a sample of 13- to 17-year-olds nearly 3 in 4 have viewed pornography.

A 2022 study of more than 1,300 teens aged 13 to 17 reported that nearly 3 in 4 teens (73%) had viewed pornography.²⁰ Of those exposed, 54% first saw online pornography at age 13 or younger; 15% were exposed at the age of 10 or younger.²¹ The same report found that 31% of teens reported viewing pornography while attending school in person, and many did so via school issued devices.²² Pornography socializes children to view the extreme, violent, degrading, abusive, and racist depictions of sex it portrays as normative. As researchers have explained, “. . . mainstream online pornography is a key social institution” contributing to the formation of norms of sexual conduct.²³ Major pornography sites are socializing their users (which include children) to view abusive and violent sex as normal, including acts such as choking or gagging (aggressive fellatio).²⁴

Demonstrating this reality, the previously mentioned study of 1,300 teens (13 to 17 years old) found that **52% of teens exposed to pornography reported seeing violent forms of pornography such as choking (36%), someone in pain (37%), or depictions of what appears to be rape (19%).**²⁵ Twenty-one percent of youth exposed to online pornography agreed that during sex most people like to be slapped, spanked, or hit, and 14% agreed that it is safe to put your hands around someone’s neck during sex.²⁶

Further, illustrating the association between pornography and violent sexual behavior, a metaanalysis of 59 studies reported that male adolescents who sexually offended were more likely to have **early exposure to pornography, higher rates of pornography use, and to have interest in sex with animals, incest, and pedophilia** than non-offending youth.²⁷

Additionally, youth who view pornography have a heightened risk of compulsive and addictive sexual behavior. Research shows that adolescents are more sensitive than adults to the rewarding properties of drugs and natural stimuli due to immature brain development in the regions of the brain associated with addiction.²⁸ Today’s advances in technology such as high definition streaming videos, webcams, and virtual reality, have not only revolutionized pornography’s accessibility, but made it increasingly vivid, interactive, and immersive.²⁹ The delivery of such visually dynamic pornography creates a potent convergence of visual and sexual stimuli for its consumers that puts adolescents especially at risk of developing pornography addictions. Among a group of 1,300 teens aged 13 to 17, of those exposed to pornography, 25% reported feeling like they should watch less pornography online than they do.³⁰

*“I can tell that **my addiction to porn is changing my behavior.** I have lost interest in things that I use to love. When watching porn I am constantly changing the video to look for something that is of interest to me. When I don’t watch porn I feel lethargic, grumpy, and unmotivated to do anything.”*

~A 16-year-old³¹



3. Self-Generated Child Sexual Exploitation Material

There has been a dramatic rise in children producing sexually explicit images of themselves—called self-generated child sexual exploitation material (SG-CSEM) or self-generated child sexual abuse material (SG-CSAM). This includes activities such as sending and receiving of sexually explicit material (“sexting”), posting of sexually explicit images online, livestreaming explicit sex acts, and even selling this content on social media or other platforms.

A study revealed that in 2021, **1 in 6 children aged 9–17 had shared their own SG-CSAM—a more than 60% increase since 2019.**³³ Thirty-three percent of children aged 13–17, and 14% of those aged 9–12, agreed “it’s normal for people my age to share nudes with each other.”³⁴

As if these findings are not terrifying enough, **43% of children who have shared sexually explicit images of themselves have done so with someone they have not met in real life and 42% of those children sent it to someone they believed to be an adult.**³⁵

Boys, as well as African American, Hispanic and Latino, and LGBTQ youth are at greater risk. From 2019–2022, the number of boys aged 9–12 who shared SG-CSAM more than doubled, while the rate for boys aged 13–17 nearly tripled.³⁶ Fourteen percent of boys aged 13–17 also report engaging in non-consensual distribution of nude images they have received.³⁷ African American, Hispanic and Latino youth, and LGBTQ youth are more likely to send SG-CSAM than their white and non-LGBTQ peers.

Self-generated material may be created under coercion, either by enticement and threats from another (predator, pimp, etc.) or as a result of pressure from a partner or peers. However, it is increasingly an activity that children are engaging in on their own, as the culture around them—particularly through pornography exposure abuse and social media—normalizes self-objectification and hypersexualization.

*“When I was 16, 2 guys online distributed nude pictures of me without my permission to other people I knew, along with family. It happened over a gaming system . . . **They pressured me for nudes and I kept pleading no. They would then tell me stuff like ‘people on the internet do it all of the time’ ‘please’ ‘this isn’t second grade,’ just general stuff to make me feel insecure.**”⁵⁸*

Further fueling this phenomenon, businesses explicitly built to profit from sexual exploitation, like OnlyFans, entice young people to sexually commodify themselves with misleading promises of fast cash and fame and no negative consequences, while social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok create tools without substantive child protections in place that are then abused. For example, TikTok has created a system similar to that of OnlyFans, where viewers can reward content creators with “gifts” that are then traded in for cash—a feature so appealing to minors that some experts have called the wildly popular app “A Strip Club Filled with 15-year-Olds.”³⁸

Whether created under coercion or produced without pressure from a third party, the risks of sharing self-generated CSAM are significant. Once an image is on the internet it can live there indefinitely. The UK’s Internet Watch Foundation reported that 72% of websites they “actioned” (that is they identified CSAM on the site and took steps to remove it) in 2021 contained self-generated imagery, and that there had been a **168% increase since 2020 in the proportion of actioned webpages displaying self-generated imagery.**³⁹ Furthermore, in 2015 the IWF found that 89.9% of the images and videos reviewed, including all of the CSAM depicting children 15 and younger, were “harvested” from where they were originally posted and then redistributed across multiple third-party websites.⁴⁰

Sexual solicitation (asking for “nudes”) and exposure to sexually explicit material by receipt of unsolicited “sexts” victimizes children; both sending and receiving sexts are associated with clinically diagnosable symptoms of PTSD among teens.⁴¹ For more on the risks and harms associated with self-generated child sexual exploitation material, see NCOSE’s “The Phenomenon of ‘Sexting’ and Its Risks to Youth.”

Finally, and very importantly, depending on the laws in your state, minors who send or receive sexts may be charged with crimes related to the creation, distribution, and/or possession of child sexual abuse material (i.e., child pornography).⁴²



The Epidemic of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children

Fast Facts

- **A Colossal Crime:** Reports of CSAM have grown exponentially in recent years, with 3,000 reports in 1998 growing to more than 1 million in 2014 to 18.4 million in 2018—those reports included more than 45 million images and videos flagged as child sexual abuse.⁴³ *The New York Times* called it an “almost unfathomable” increase in criminal behavior.⁴⁴
- **CSAM Widely Available on the Surface Web:** CSAM is no longer restricted to the dark web; 97% of CSAM identified by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection’s Project Arachnid “hides in plain site on the clear web on image/file hosting services, forums, content delivery networks, and also mainstream and fringe adult pornography sites.”⁴⁵ Demonstrating CSAM’s wide mainstream availability, Twitter reported removing an average of 100,000 accounts per month linked to child sexual abuse in the last six months of 2021.⁴⁶
- **U.S. the World’s Largest CSAM Host:** The U.S. hosts 30% of the world’s CSAM URLs—more than any other country in the world.⁴⁷
- **Law Enforcement Overwhelmed:** CSAM has so overwhelmed law enforcement that the FBI and LAPD prioritize material depicting infants and toddlers, largely ignoring cases that involve older children.⁴⁸
- **Online Enticement Skyrocketing:** Reports of online enticement of children—which involves use of the Internet to coerce, manipulate, or deceive a minor into sexual activity⁴⁹—to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) increased by 97.5% between 2019 and 2020.⁵⁰
- **Interactive Internet Platforms & OSCE:** According to NCMEC, “Any online service which allows user-generated content is potentially open to abuse by those with a sexual interest in children.”⁵¹
- **Risks to Children Online:** A 2022 report by the company Bark found that 9.4% of tweens and 14.2% of teens encountered predatory behaviors from someone online.⁵²
- **Exponential Rise in Self-Produced Child Sexual Images:** 1 in 7 children ages 9-12 shared their own nude images in 2020, up from 1 in 20 in 2019; among those who sent images 50% sent them to someone they had never met in real life and 41% believed they were sending the images to an adult.⁵³ The UK’s Internet Watch Foundation reported that 72% of websites they actioned for CSAM in 2021 contained self-generated imagery, a 168% increase from 2020.⁵⁴
- **Redistribution of Self-Produced Sexual Images of Children:** In an analysis of sexually explicit material produced by youth (which was defined as “nude or semi-nude images or videos produced by a young person of themselves engaging in erotic or sexual activity and intentionally shared by electronic means”) by the Internet Watch Foundation, 89.9% of the images and videos reviewed, including all of the material depicting children 15 and younger, had been harvested from its original upload location to be redistributed on third party websites.⁵⁵



Why is This Happening?

Technology companies have no incentive to put the necessary resources in place to adequately protect children. Interactive service providers are insufficiently regulated and enjoy broad immunity for the grave harms and extensive risks on their inherently dangerous-by-design products. To a large extent, technology and social media companies have proven derelict in their ethical and social responsibility to prevent and/or swiftly identify and remove child sexual abuse material (CSAM) from their platforms and to restrict children's access to predators, pornography, and sexually explicit content. These combined factors have allowed the problem to grow to epic proportions—outpacing existing technologies that address online harms, as well as law enforcement's ability to respond.



Everyone Must Step Up to Protect Children Online!

Online sexual exploitation of children is clearly a problem of staggering proportions. Technology corporations have prioritized profit and innovation at the expense of child safety, placing the burden on parents and schools—even children themselves—to protect minors from inherently harmful platforms and products. Governmental regulatory agencies have been slow to recognize and address online sexual abuse and exploitation of children.

Key Goals In Pursuit Of Basic Online Safety Standards

It is time to put the onus of responsibility back on those in the public and private sector with the power to enact commonsense, systemic solutions. Change can be instigated by private corporations, legislators, and school officials embracing their responsibility to keep children safe so that they can connect, learn, love, and thrive online and off. Here are ways these sectors can act to dramatically improve child online safety.

Tech Companies

- 1. Default to safety:** Turn on all privacy, safety, and content settings to the highest level by default for minors on platforms and devices.
- 2. Safety by design:** Build new products or platforms on which children are likely to be active with “safety by design” principles and age-appropriate design codes from the start.⁵⁶
- 3. Monitoring and interventions:** Institute proactive and robust monitoring and intervention for online grooming, child sexual abuse material, sexual harassment, solicitation, and related dangers on platforms providing livestreams, comments, and direct messages.
- 4. Restrict adult access to minors:** Create greater restrictions on the ability of adult strangers to find or contact minors, such as through direct messages, public “friend” lists, or recommendations by the platform.
- 5. Improve reporting tools:** Provide prominent reporting options with age-appropriate wording at the level of content and within user accounts. This should include reporting and content removal processes which by default prioritize removing alleged nonconsensual content immediately until consent can be positively proven.
- 6. Simplified parental controls:** Give parents simplified controls that are lockable, including more device notifications and explanations of parental controls and a single button option for age-based restrictions on a device or platform.

Legislators

- 1. Raise age of digital adulthood:** Raise the legal age of digital adulthood from 13 to 18; implement a graduated approach to features based on user age and risk level.
- 2. Default to safety:** Mandate that all privacy, safety, and content settings must be turned on to the highest level by default for minors on platforms and devices.
- 3. Mandate consumer age verification:** Require that Internet platforms knowingly hosting pornographic content verify the age of their users.
- 4. Implement consent and age verification of those depicted:** Mandate that Internet technologies implement meaningful consent and age verification for any person depicted in sexually explicit content hosted online.

Schools

- 1. Implement mandatory filtering:** Schools routinely issue Internet-connected devices to children, and consequently have the responsibility to ensure that filtering and enhanced safety mechanisms on all school-sanctioned or provided electronic devices, platforms, edtech tools, or WiFi are activated and routinely checked.
- 2. Verify research databases are appropriate:** many popular research databases such as EBSCO and Proquest boast age-appropriate curricula, but contain or allow easy access by K-12 students to content promoting sexually risky behavior (threesomes, anal sex, BDSM), the commercial sex industry (sugar dating), and even contain pornography and links to prostitution and pornography sites.
- 3. Address online dangers:** We address safety in the physical world, but many schools don't prioritize discussing dangers in the digital space. Especially considering the increased use of digital platforms and devices in order for students to learn, schools must ensure students receive proper online safety training and have clear instructions for how to report certain content and contact by strangers.
- 4. Mobile phone policies that protect:** It is now common for children to own smartphones and bring them to school. Unfortunately, many children are first exposed to pornography from other students sharing content through their phones while on the playground, in class, or on the bus. Schools must determine and enforce appropriate guidelines and policies that prioritize the safety and well-being of all students.

“Giving our kids with underdeveloped brains untethered access to all social expression is like giving them a loaded gun with zero training. We are giving our children the key to the family car at the age 12 with no driver’s education, and then we sit back and wonder by they keep crashing and burning?”⁵⁹

– Collin Kartchner

What Can I Do?

Some of the most significant improvements to child safety online have come from concerned citizens directly demanding corporations do better. Your voice DOES make a difference.

Visit EndSexualExploitation.org/Action-Center to press on policymakers and corporations to do everything in their power to ensure our children can live, love, and thrive . . . online and off!

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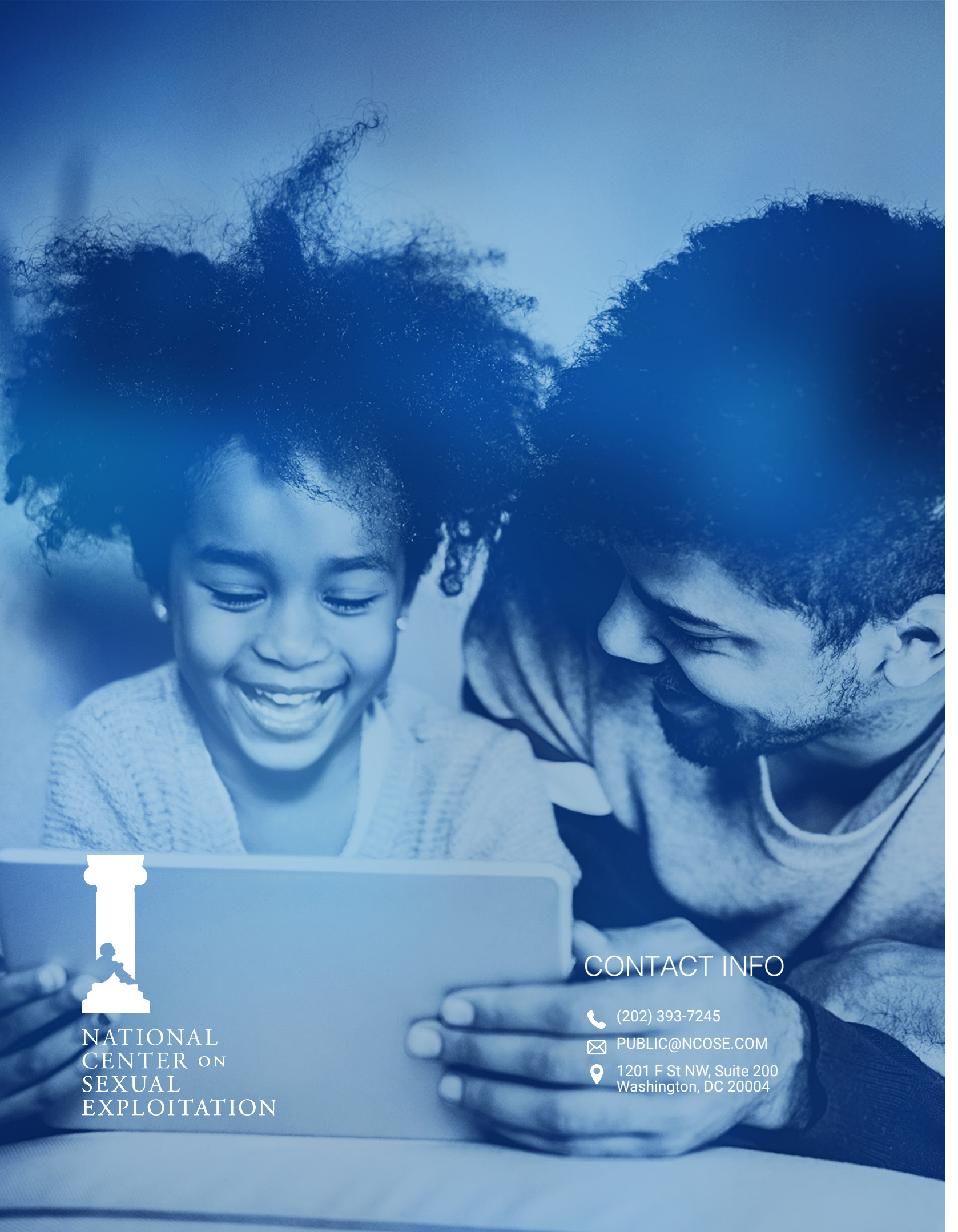
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