FROM GROOMING TO ABUSE, EXPLOITATION AND DISAPPEARANCE:

PROTECTING CHILDREN ACROSS DIGITAL SPACES

Missing Children Europe

COG Combat Online Grooming

CONTENT WARNING

This report addresses grooming, child sexual exploitation and abuse, and situations in which children go missing. It includes references to sexual violence, coercion, exploitation and psychological harm affecting children. Some content may be distressing, particularly for survivors of abuse or those working closely with affected children. In reading this paper, please prioritise your own psychological safety and wellbeing.

Missing Children Europe (MCE) is the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children connecting 35 organisations from 28 European countries committed to prevent that children go missing and to protect them from any violence, abuse or exploitation that lead to or results from going missing. MCE coordinates the network of the 116 000 missing child hotlines, the free service dedicated to children (at risk of) going missing and their families, operated by national organisations and active in 32 European countries. MCE also coordinates the network of cross-border family mediators. MCE works with professionals who assist missing children and their families and supports them to better protect and empower children through research, training, advocacy, awareness raising, facilitating thematic exchanges and cross-border cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

Children today spend a significant part of their lives online and grow up in a highly digitalised environment. Online platforms, social networks, gaming spaces, and messaging applications play an important role in how children communicate, socialise, express themselves, and build relationships. Internet use is widespread among young people in Europe, with 97% of young people in the EU using the internet daily[1] and 69% of 9- to 22-year-olds using social media or playing games online for more than 3 hours a day on weekdays.[2]

These digital environments offer many positive opportunities[3], including access to information, opportunities for learning and creativity, and spaces for social connection and peer support. At the same time, the expanding use of the internet among young people raises concerns about their exposure to harmful online environments and content, including online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Evolving digital technologies are creating new spaces for offenders to sexually abuse and exploit children, including through the process of grooming.

Grooming refers to **the deliberate process of approaching and building trust with a child through the internet or other digital technologies, with the purpose of exploiting or abusing them**. The process of grooming may occur in person, online, or in a hybrid manner. Grooming can take different forms depending on the offender's intentions. Grooming for sexual abuse purposes occurs when the intention is to facilitate **sexual abuse interaction** with the child, either online, in person, or both. Grooming for other purposes may include, but is not limited to, criminal exploitation, radicalisation, forced labour, slavery, or forced marriage.

Grooming of children for sexual abuse purposes is criminalised under EU law by Directive 2011/93/EU on combating child sexual abuse and exploitation,[4] and under the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention).[5]

As the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children, this report focuses on grooming as a form of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

[1] Eurostat (2025) 97% of young people in the EU use the internet daily.
[2] European Union (s. d.) Better Internet for Kids.
[3] Unicef (s.d.) Child Safety Online: Every child must be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse on the internet.
[4] Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA.
[5] Council of Europe (2007) Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Available data points to a worrying rise in grooming and related forms of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. The most recent data from BIK Hotline Observatory shows that of the 4.5 million reports received by the network in 2025, over 2.5 million concerned child sexual abuse or exploitation material.[6] Along the line, recent report from the INSAFE helpline network indicates grooming as one of the reasons children contact helplines to seek for help.[7]

In the United States, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received 1.4 million reports of online enticement, a 156% increase from 2024.[8] In the UK, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reported in 2024 that online grooming crimes against children increased by 89% over six years.[9] Similarly, the Internet Watch Foundation identified a dramatic increase in the number of webpages showing children under 10 who had been groomed, manipulated, or coerced into performing sexual acts online.[10]

The NSCCP reported in 2024 that online grooming crimes have increased by 89% over the past six years

[6] Better Internet for Kids (2026) Key trends from EU hotlines in 2025.
[7] Better Internet for Kids (2026) Latest helpline trends: Quarter 4 2025.
[8] National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2026) The Work Never Stops: A First Look at NCMEC's 2025 Data. According to NCMEC, online enticement involves an individual communicating with someone believed to be a child via the internet with the intent to commit a sexual offense or abduction. This is a broad category of online exploitation and includes sextortion, in which a child is being groomed to take sexually explicit images and/or ultimately meet face-to-face with someone for sexual purposes, or to engage in a sexual conversation online or, in some instances, to sell/trade the child's sexual images.
[9] National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2024) Online grooming crimes against children increase by 89% in six years.
[10] Internet Watch Foundation (2024) Under 10s groomed online 'like never before' as hotline discovers record amount of child sexual abuse.

Despite the availability of these figures, obtaining accurate prevalence data remains challenging for several reasons:

- Grooming is inherently covert and manipulative, and many cases are never disclosed or reported, particularly when the abuse occurs exclusively online or does not involve physical contact. Children often do not recognise themselves as victims, as grooming frequently involves building trust, affection, and a sense of comfort. This emotional manipulation can discourage disclosure and delay identification.[11]

- Some grooming behaviours may resemble ordinary adult-child interactions, such as playing games, offering compliments, or showing attention. Without clear insight into the offenders' intent and broader pattern of conduct, such behaviours may appear benign. As a result, detection often depends on hindsight, introducing uncertainty and potential bias in assessment.[12]

- Grooming varies widely in form, context, and duration, ranging from brief exchanges to processes unfolding over months or years, which complicates consistent identification and measurement.[13]

- Finally, the absence of a shared and operational definition of grooming limits systematic data collection and comparability across jurisdictions.

In light of these challenges, **strengthening prevention, awareness, and response mechanisms is essential to better identify grooming behaviours and protect children from harm**.

[11] A.-M. McAlinden (2012) 'Grooming' and the Sexual Abuse of Children: Institutional, Internet and Familial Dimensions, Oxford University Press, p. 32.
[12] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors.
[13] Ibidem.

GROOMING AND CHILD DISAPPEARANCE

Despite progress made at the EU level through the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children,[14] currently under revision, children continue to face challenges and are increasingly at risk of becoming victims of child sexual abuse and grooming, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation, **leading to the risk of going missing**.

Every year, Missing Children Europe (MCE) collects data from its members and organisations operating the 116 000 hotline for missing children across Europe to monitor trends in missing children cases, provide evidence to inform prevention efforts, and advocate for stronger child protection policies at national and European levels. In 2025, data from hotlines indicated 92 cases in which online grooming was linked to a child going missing.[15] In 2024, grooming was again identified as an emerging concern by hotlines,[16] although very few of them systematically collect such data. While these figures provide an important starting point, they still significantly underestimate the true prevalence of grooming and its link to children going missing.

Research conducted by MCE as part of the **Comprehensive European Strategy Against Grooming and Missing (CESAGRAM) project** revealed a strong link between online grooming and child disappearance.[17] The findings show that grooming can act both as a cause and a consequence of children going missing. In some cases, grooming directly leads to disappearance, with children running away due to threats, fear, sexual extortion, blackmail, shame, or distress linked to the abuse. Conversely, children who go missing due to existing vulnerabilities may become more exposed to grooming and exploitation while missing, as isolation, lack of support, and increased reliance on online communication heighten their susceptibility to manipulation.

[14] Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA.
[15] Missing Children Europe (2026) Figures and Trends 2025.
[16] Missing Children Europe (2025) Figures and Trends 2024.
[17] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors.

Grooming is thus not a standalone issue, but part of broader and interconnected patterns of harm affecting children (at risk of) going missing and child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. It must be addressed through a holistic child protection approach that spans research, prevention, education, and awareness: one that protects children both from the risks of sexual exploitation and the risks of disappearance, as well as from the less visible harm and risks that are often overlooked or neglected.

This report aims to strengthen the understanding of the grooming process, the interconnections between grooming, child disappearance, and child sexual abuse and exploitation, and sets out **concrete and actionable recommendations** to prevent grooming and protect children from its short- and long-term consequences.

In 2025 data from 116000 hotlines indicated 92 cases in which online grooming was linked to a child going missing

UNDERSTANDING GROOMING

DEFINITION AND PROCESS OF GROOMING

Grooming refers to the deliberate process of approaching and building trust with a child through the internet or other digital technologies, with the purpose of exploiting or abusing them. Grooming for sexual abuse purposes occurs when the intention is to facilitate sexual abuse interaction with the child, either online, in person, or both. It should be distinguished from grooming for other purposes, which may include, but is not limited to, criminal exploitation, radicalisation, forced labour, slavery, or forced marriage.

While grooming is frequently associated with adults, it is important to recognise that children and young people can also display harmful sexual behaviours towards other children, including forms of peer-on-peer abuse that may involve grooming-like dynamics.[18] Most research has concentrated on adult offenders, which helps explain why adult grooming is more widely recognised and understood. However, emerging evidence underscores the role of peers in grooming dynamics, particularly in online environments that provide anonymity and diminish perceived accountability.[19]

Findings from the CESAGRAM research further challenge the public image of the older adult offender. Among the 20 survivors interviewed who described the age of their offenders, 11 reported having been abused by other children or very young adults.[20]

Recognising peer-abuse underscores the need to clearly differentiate such abuse from age-appropriate, consensual interactions among children, such as the sharing of intimate content (so-called 'sexting'), to ensure responses are appropriate and proportionate. Grooming involves a deliberate, manipulative act to gain trust, emotional dependency, or leverage to sexually exploit or abuse a child, typically through deception, flattery, or emotional coercion over time. Consensual sharing lacks the premeditated intent to manipulate and exploit. Preserving this distinction ensures that harmful sexual behaviours and abuse, including grooming-like conduct, are properly recognised as a form of abuse, while avoiding the inappropriate criminalisation of children engaged in consensual, age-appropriate peer behaviour.

[18] Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children (2025) Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2nd ed, p. 41.

[19] In the context of this position paper, a peer refers to another child who is close in age, maturity and development. On this question, see L. Ashurst and A.-M. McAlinden (2015) Young people, Peer-to-Peer Grooming and Sexual Offending: Understanding and Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour within a Social Media Society, Probation Journal, pp. 374-388.

[20] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, p. 24. Out of the 16 participants who described the age of their offender, nine identified at least one offender as a young adult aged between 18 and 24, while two reported being groomed by minors aged 13 and 14 respectively.

Considering the different forms grooming can take (online only, in person only, or a combination of both), **the occurrence of a physical meeting between the child and the offender should not be a determining factor for the criminalisation of the act of grooming.** Limiting the definition of grooming to situations involving in-person contact risks overlooking serious harm that can occur entirely in digital environments. For this reason, MCE considers that online-only grooming should also constitute a criminal offense, as recommended by the Lanzarote Committee of the Council of Europe in its opinion on the criminalisation of the solicitation of children for sexual abuse purposes through information and communication technologies.[21]

MOVING BEYOND THE "STRANGER DANGER" FOCUS IN PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Although abuse by strangers does occur, it accounts for a minority of child sexual abuse cases. A recent meta-analysis on offenders' identities in online crimes against children found that around 70% of offenders are known to the victim, and 44% are minors, challenging the common "stranger danger" framing of online abuse[22] and confirming that abuse most often occurs within the child's circle of trust, making it even more difficult for children to report and overcome these crimes.[23] This underscores the importance of taking abuse perpetrated by peers or persons familiar to the victim into account when developing prevention strategies and responses, rather than concentrating solely on unknown adult offenders.

[21] Lanzarote Committee (2016) Opinion on Article 23 of the Lanzarote Convention and its Explanatory Note.
[22] S. Sutton and D. Finkelhor (2024) Perpetrators' Identity in Online Crimes Against Children: A Meta-Analysis, Trauma, Violence & Abuse, p. 1762.
[23] On this question, see Council of Europe (2025) Implementation report: Protecting Children Against Sexual Abuse in the Circle of Trust: Legal frameworks.

THE GROOMING PROCESS

Grooming typically unfolds through **recurring behavioural patterns**. While no single validated model of grooming exists, it is widely understood as a multi-stage, multifaceted process involving trust-building, relationship formation, and the gradual normalisation of harmful behaviours.[24]

The process varies depending on the child, the offender and the context, making its start and end difficult to identify. Offenders adjust their tactics in response to the child's reactions and emotional vulnerabilities.[25] As a result, timeframes for grooming vary significantly: some interactions last only minutes, while others can continue for months or even years. Offenders continually assess risk throughout the process, adapting their behaviour to avoid detection and to maintain access to the child.[26]

Grooming rarely follows a single, linear path. The stages described below may overlap, accelerate, or occur in different orders depending on the offender's strategies and context. They are therefore best understood as clusters of behaviours rather than fixed steps. Based on the survivor testimonies collected as part of the CESAGRAM research, MCE identifies the following recurring elements of the grooming process:

VICTIM SELECTION AND INITIATING CONTACT

The offender starts by deliberately selecting and initiating contact with a child. Selection is typically based on accessibility, emotional and social vulnerability, such as low self-esteem, family conflict, or loneliness. In online settings, most offenders initiate contact through friends or follow requests, gaming platforms, or chat sites, often concealing their identity. Offenders may contact large numbers of children simultaneously and wait for a response.

GAINING ACCESS AND DEVELOPING TRUST

After initiating contact, offenders focus on building trust, both with the child and, at times, with their family. This may involve showing interest, offering compliments, being attentive, highlighting similarities, or giving gifts. This step is particularly characteristic of grooming, as abuse or exploitation is enabled by the level of trust placed in offenders.[27] These tactics make the child feel valued and safe, fostering dependency and reducing suspicion.

Regardless of the online platform where initial contact occurs, offenders frequently attempt to move conversations from public or semi-public spaces to private, fully encrypted messaging services, a process known as *off platforming*, to evade detection.[28]

LABELLING AND EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Once trust is established, offenders often reframe the relationship to create emotional confusion and control. They may label it romantic, special, or friendship-based, encouraging the child to see it as consensual. This emotional manipulation instils a false sense of agency and responsibility in the victim, making them feel complicit and less likely to disclose the abuse.[29]

DESENSITISATION AND SEXUALISATION

Gradually, the offender introduces sexual content to normalise inappropriate behaviour. This often starts with sexualised conversations, the sharing of sexual images, or the use of pornographic material, progressing slowly to requests for explicit sexual content.
These tactics reduce the child's ability to distinguish between age-appropriate and abusive behaviour, conditioning them for sexual exploitation and abuse.

MANIPULATION, COERCION AND CONTROL

Offenders use coercive tactics to ensure the child's compliance and silence. These include emotional manipulation, such as threatening to end the relationship or withdraw affection, inducing guilt or responsibility, promising rewards, or making explicit threats. Such coercion traps the child into the abusive dynamic, often reinforced by the child's loneliness, fear of losing connection, or emotional dependency.[30]

[24] H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) A Review of Online Grooming: Characteristics and Concerns, Aggression & Violent Behavior, p. 64.
[25] Ibidem.
[26] M. Ioannou et al. (2018) A Comparison of Online and Offline Grooming Characteristics: An Application of the Victim Roles Model, Computers in Human Behavior, p. 292.
[27] A.-M. McAlinden (2012) The Nature and Extent of Sexual Grooming in 'Grooming' and the Sexual Abuse of Children: Institutional, Internet and Familial Dimensions, Oxford University Press, pp. 26 and following.
[28] J. Bryce et al. (2023) Evidence Review on Online Risks to Children, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Learning, p. 38; See for instance J. A. Kloess et al. (2017) A Qualitative Analysis of Offenders' Modus Operandi in Sexually Exploitative Interactions with Children Online, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, pp. 563-591, and other research papers cited by T. R. Ringenberg et al. (2022) A Scoping Review of Child Grooming Strategies: Pre- and Post-Internet, Child Abuse & Neglect, p. 7.
[29] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 25-26.
[30] Ibidem, pp. 26-29.

THE CULT COMMUNITIES: ONLINE GROOMING AS A TOOL OF VIOLENT EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

A growing online threat, referred to by Europol as "cult communities", consists of decentralised networks that engage in high-harm offences, including child sexual abuse, serious violence, cybercrime, and extremist activities. These communities deliberately target vulnerable children on mainstream online platforms, using grooming as a key tactic to manipulate and control them through emotional coercion, trust-building, and extortion. Offenders exploit loneliness and social isolation to gain influence, often competing to inflict the greatest harm, such as coercing minors to produce sexual content, engage in self-harm, harm others, or livestream violent acts. Abusive material is frequently shared within these networks to humiliate victims, assert control, and enhance the offenders' status, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and criminal activity.[31]

INCREASED USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, DEEPFAKES, AND NUDIFYING TOOLS

Deepfakes and generative artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly being used in grooming practices. **AI-generated child sexual abuse material (AIG-CSAM) has emerged as a powerful tool for manipulation, with these materials being used to pressure children into producing more content and to sustain cycles of coercion and extortion.**[32] Generative AI models can produce highly realistic images, enabling offenders to create large volumes of unique, photorealistic sexual images of children that may be indistinguishable from real child sexual abuse material.[33]

In the first half of 2025, analysts from the Internet Watch Foundation recorded a 400% increase in AI-generated child sexual abuse material, with such material identified on 210 webpages.[34] Reports of AI-generated child sexual abuse material have also been increasingly linked to cases of grooming, sexual extortion, and blackmail.[35]

[31] Europol (2025) Intelligence Notification: The rise of Online Cult Communities dedicated to Extremely Violent Child Abuse; NCA, NPCC and Counter Terrorism Policing (2025) Com Groups. See also Resolver and Kroll (2026), Weaponised Loneliness: Critical Harm Intelligence briefing.
[32] Internet Watch Foundation (2026) AI CSAM Report 2026, Harm without limits: AI child sexual abuse material through the eyes of our Analysts, p. 30.
[33] Internet Watch Foundation (2023) How AI is being abused to create child sexual abuse imagery, p. 8.
[34] Internet Watch Foundation (2025) Full feature-length AI films of child sexual abuse will be 'inevitable' as synthetic videos make 'huge leaps' in sophistication in a year.
[35] National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2025) A collective concern: Parent and carer views on the online blackmail of children and young people.

Nudifying tools further intensify these dynamics by allowing users to upload an image of a clothed person and generate a fabricated nude version, often using widely available, open-source image generation models. **Nudifying tools and apps should be banned, and access to these technologies blocked**.[36] All these developments risk perpetuating trauma, increasing offenders' sense of impunity, and leading to the victimisation of new children or re-victimisation of survivors.

WHERE DOES GROOMING TAKE PLACE?

Studies examining children's understandings of online harm reveal that while children generally demonstrate strong awareness of "stranger danger" in offline contexts — often associating it with abduction or immediate physical harm — they tend to perceive online interactions with strangers as commonplace and less threatening.[37] The absence of immediate physical danger contributes to this perception, despite the fact that harmful dynamics can still develop over time.[38]

This gap in children's perceptions highlights the importance of examining the online environments where grooming occurs, as evidence suggests that grooming most often takes place on online platforms widely used by children, such as social media and online gaming environments.[39] The proliferation of online spaces, combined with their central role in children's everyday lives, has increased opportunities for sexual abuse and exploitation.

Technology has not created grooming; rather, it has expanded offenders' reach, speed, and capacity to access children, interact with them, adapt their tactics, and avoid detection. Online platforms facilitate broader and easier access to children, including those seeking connection, attention, or validation.

This expanded access is compounded by anonymity and identity manipulation, which allow offenders to conceal their age, gender, or intention, making it more difficult for children to assess and recognise abusive dynamics.[40]

This increased accessibility, and the ways offenders exploit online environments, also complicate detection and reporting, particularly as interactions can move from public to private, encrypted channels. While end-to-end encryption plays an important role in protecting users' privacy and security, it can also be misused to facilitate illegal activities.

[36] Child Helpline International et al. (2026) Unifying voices worldwide: No to Nudify.
[37] A. Third et al. (2024) Protecting Children from Online Grooming: Cross Cultural, Qualitative and Child-Centred Data to Guide Grooming Prevention and Response, Western Sydney University, p. 49.
[38] Ibidem.
[39] J. Bryce et al. (2023) Evidence Review on Online Risks to Children, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Learning, p. 38.
[40] H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) A review of online grooming: characteristics and concerns, Aggression and Violent Behavior, pp. 66-67.

Research shows that online interactions often begin on more visible online platforms, such as chat rooms or social media, before progressively shifting to less regulated and more private communication channels.[41] This migration towards end-to-end encrypted online platforms may affect the detection and reporting of online abuse,[42] as illustrated by the drop in reports received by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children: in 2024, 29.2 million reports of suspected exploitation were recorded, a 19% decrease from the previous year,[43] largely due to a 6.9 million drop in reports from Meta following the introduction of end-to-end encryption on Facebook and Messenger.[44] While encryption strengthens privacy protections, this trend highlights potential challenges for identifying and reporting harmful activities online.

Immersive digital environments, such as the metaverse, also raise specific and growing concerns for the protection of children online. The metaverse is commonly described as a three-dimensional virtual environment in which users, represented by avatars, interact in immersive digital spaces, enabled by technologies such as virtual and augmented reality and social gaming platforms.[45] Although empirical research remains limited, available studies already identify grooming as an emerging crime threat in the metaverse.[46] Crime scenarios described by INTERPOL illustrate how offenders may manipulate or coerce children through avatars into sexualised interactions or the creation of explicit content.[47]

IDENTIFYING CHILDREN MOST EXPOSED TO GROOMING TRAJECTORIES

Grooming can target any child, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic background.

All children must therefore be protected against it, and prevention programs must be designed to safeguard all children. Testimonies from survivors involved in the CESAGRAM project confirm this reality: several participants reported having no pre-existing vulnerabilities, demonstrating that the absence of recognised risk factors does not prevent victimisation.

[41] See for instance J. A. Kloess et al. (2017) A qualitative analysis of offenders' modus operandi in sexually exploitative interactions with children online. Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, pp. 563-591.
[42] J. A. Kloess et al. (2019) Offense Processes of Online Sexual Grooming and Abuse of Children via Internet Communication Platforms, Sexual Abuse, pp. 73-96.
[43] National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2024) CyberTipline Report.
[44] NBC News (2025) Child Exploitation Watchdog says Meta Encryption Led to Sharp Decrease in Tips and Reports.
[45] G. D. Ritterbusch and M. R. Teichmann (2023) Defining the Metaverse: A Systematic Literature Review, IEEE, p. 1.
[46] J. Gomez-Quintero et al. (2024) A Scoping Study of Crime Facilitated by the Metaverse, Futures, pp. 1-21.
[47] Interpol (2024) Grooming, Radicalization and Cyber-Attacks: Interpol Warns of 'Metacrime'.

While online grooming can affect any child, **some are at heightened risk due to pre-existing intersecting individual, familial, and social risk factors that make them more vulnerable to violence, abuse, or exploitation.** When one or more of these factors overlap, children face an increased risk of becoming victims of grooming, which can, in a snowball effect, further heighten the risk of going missing or becoming victims of violence.

Following the CESAGRAM research, the risk factors that can influence the risk for children to become victims of grooming include:

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Age: Age has been identified as an important factor in children's exposure to online grooming. Some studies suggest that older children are more frequently targeted than younger ones.[48] Evidence from child protection organisations supports this pattern: the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reports that girls aged 12-15 are among the most likely to be victims of online grooming,[49] while a Save the Children Finland study found that 62% of surveyed children aged 11-17 reported experiencing grooming attempts, including receiving sexual messages from an older person.[50] However, younger children may be more vulnerable to harm when solicited due to lower maturity, limited experience, and reduced capacity to recognise, avoid, or respond to sexual advances from adults.[51]

Gender and sexual orientation: Girls are more likely to be targeted for online grooming,[52] although boys are also at risk, with male victimisation likely being underreported.[53] Children who identify as (or who are perceived to be) LGBTQIA+, may be more exposed to harmful online dynamics, as experiences of stigma or social exclusion offline can lead them to seek acceptance and connection online.[54] Evidence from the *Young, Queer, and Away* project, led by MCE, highlights how these vulnerabilities can intersect with risks of grooming.

[48] E. Calvete et al. (2021) Moderating Factors of the Association between Being Sexually Solicited by Adults and Active Online Sexual Behaviors in Adolescents, Computers in Human Behavior, p. 2; P. de Santisteban and M. Gámez-Guadix (2017) Prevalence and Risk Factors Among Minors for Online Sexual Solicitations and Interactions with Adults, The Journal of Sex Research, pp. 1-12.

[49] National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2022) Time to act: An assessment of the Online Safety Bill against the NSPCC's six tests for protecting children.

[50] Pelastakaa Lapset - Rädda Barnen (2021) Grooming in the Eyes of a Child - A Report on the Experiences of Children on Online Grooming.

[51] P. M. Greenfield (2004) Developmental Considerations for Determining Appropriate Internet Use Guidelines for Children, Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, pp. 751-762.

[52] M. Gámez-Guadix and E. Mateos-Pérez (2019) Longitudinal and Reciprocal Relationships between Sexting, Online Sexual Solicitations and Cyberbullying among Minors, Computers in Human Behavior, pp. 70-76.

[53] H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) A Review of Young's People Vulnerabilities to Online Grooming, Aggression and Violent Behavior, p. 136.

[54] M. Joleby (2021) Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse, Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, pp. 7-22; K. Shalev et al. (2026) Young Queer and Away from Home: Understanding the Experiences of LGBTIQ+ Children Going Missing and Living Away from Home, University of Portsmouth, Missing Children Europe & IGLYO, pp. 12-45.

In this study, some LGBTQIA+ young people identified grooming as a factor contributing to leaving home, describing their departure not as a voluntary move toward independence but as a survival strategy in response to abuse.[55]

Mental health: Children's low self-esteem, negative self-image, and mental health difficulties have been identified as risk factors that may be exploited by offenders in the grooming process.

Disability: Children with disabilities may experience increased vulnerability due to reduced social support, reliance on trusted adults, and barriers to recognising or responding to harmful behaviours.[56]

Migration status: Children in migration, especially those who are unaccompanied, separated from caregivers, or displaced, face heightened vulnerability to various forms of exploitation, including grooming. Migration-related factors, such as limited access to protective services, reduced social support, or unstable communication channels, can increase their exposure and be actively leveraged by offenders.[57]

It should be noted that grooming occurs across all countries and cultures, and research does not show consistent links between nationality or ethnicity and vulnerability to grooming. Differences in prevalence are more likely to reflect cultural norms around recognition, disclosure, and reporting, rather than inherent traits. Evidence examining ethnicity and online grooming remains limited and context-specific.[58]

FAMILIAL FACTORS

Family conflict: Children exposed to family conflict and low cohesion may be more vulnerable to grooming. This includes those experiencing divorce or family separation, domestic violence, and parental substance misuse. Vulnerability may also increase when children are exposed to serious illness or death within the family, particularly where such circumstances disrupt stability. Offenders can exploit children's need for empathy or attention during periods of family stress.

Placement in alternative care: Children living in alternative care settings may face increased vulnerability due to disrupted support networks or prior experiences of abuse or neglect.[59]

[55] Ibidem, p. 45.
[56] H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) A Review of Young's People Vulnerabilities to Online Grooming, Aggression and Violent Behavior, pp. 138-139.
[57] UNICEF (2020) The Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children: Migration, Post-Expert Consultation Brief.
[58] H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) A Review of Young's People Vulnerabilities to Online Grooming, Aggression and Violent Behavior, p. 141.
[59] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 9-10.

Socio-economic status alone does not determine vulnerability. Higher income may increase internet access, while lower income can exacerbate distress when harms occur. Parental education appears more influential than income, with higher levels of education linked to reduced vulnerability.[60]

SOCIAL FACTORS

Loneliness: Emotional isolation and the absence of supportive peer relationships increase the risk for children to be exposed to grooming.[61]

Peer influence: Involvement in social environments where harmful online behaviours are normalised or encouraged can increase vulnerability. This may include peer groups were sharing sexual content, interacting with unknown adults online, or dismissing online safety concerns is seen as common or acceptable, sometimes due to broader social pressures, lack of guidance, or exposure to similar behaviours.[62]

(Cyber)bullying: School experiences also influence exposure to grooming. Strong relationships with peers, teachers, and caregivers are protective, whereas bullying and cyberbullying, social exclusion, disengagement, and persistent feelings of loneliness may heighten vulnerability.[63]

PRIOR EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE

Prior abuse experiences and victimisation, such as neglect, physical violence, or sexual abuse, are identified as strong predictors of vulnerability to online grooming.[64] Similarly, previous psychological maltreatment has also been linked to a higher rate of extrafamilial sexual abuse.[65]

[60] H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) A Review of Young's People Vulnerabilities to Online Grooming, Aggression and Violent Behavior, pp. 139-140.
[61] H. C. Whittle et al. (2014) In Their Own Words: Young People's Vulnerabilities to Being Groomed and Sexually Abused Online, Psychology, p. 1188.
[62] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 9-10.
[63] Ibidem.
[64] Ibidem.
[65] M. S. Wallimann and D. C. Lätsch (2025) Psychological Maltreatment: Discovering Its Different Subtypes and Related Developmental Risk Factors, Child Abuse & Neglect, p. 11.

GROOMING SIGNS THAT CAN BE RECOGNISED BY FRONTILINE PROFESSIONALS AND CAREGIVERS

Professionals who work closely with children and caregivers are often well placed to identify early indicators of grooming, particularly when they observe changes in behaviour, relationships, or online activity over time. While individual signs may appear minor, patterns or combinations of indicators can signal that a child is at risk.[66] The following is a non-exhaustive list of warning signs that may be associated with grooming:

- **Behavioural and emotional changes** may include noticeable shifts in mood or attitude, such as increased anxiety, irritability, fearfulness, withdrawal, or low self-esteem. A sudden decline in academic performance, concentration, or engagement in school or group activities may also be observed. Children may become defensive, evasive, or secretive when asked about relationships or online activity, or display sexualised knowledge, language, or attitudes inappropriate for their age or context.
- **Changes in online activity and technology use** may include frequent or secretive use of digital devices during school or care settings, visible distress or agitation when access to a phone or the internet is restricted, or references to online relationships with adults or significantly older people that appear unusual or hidden. The receipt of unexplained gifts, money, or digital items, such as in-game currency linked to online interactions, may also be a warning sign.
- **Relationships and social indicators** include increasing isolation from peers, withdrawal from previously trusted adults or professionals, or the development of intense, dependent, or secretive relationships with adults or older children, either online or offline. Signs of coercion or control, such as pressure to maintain constant communication, monitoring of the child's behaviour, or fear of upsetting a particular person, should raise concern.
- **Physical or situational indicators** may involve repeated absences from school or activities, running away, or expressing reluctance to return home. Changes in personal appearance, signs of exhaustion, or indicators of neglect may also be present and warrant attention.

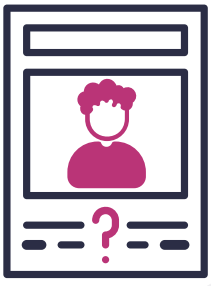
[66] National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (s. d.) Grooming: recognising the signs, Learning National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN GROOMING AND CHILD DISAPPEARANCE

WHAT IS CHILD DISAPPEARANCE?

Child disappearance refers to situations in which a person under the age of 18 is absent from their home or care setting, either voluntarily or forcibly, and their whereabouts are unknown. Despite the seriousness of the issue, there is still no universally accepted definition or understanding of what constitutes a missing child in Europe. Estimates such as 250,000 children going missing annually are based on outdated figures from a 2013 European Commission report,[67] creating significant uncertainty about the current scale, causes, and circumstances of child disappearance. Without a shared and operational definition, it remains difficult to fully understand why children go missing or to develop consistent prevention and protection strategies across countries.

To address this challenge, **MCE has been collecting and analysing data from the 116 000 missing children hotline since 2014 through its Figures and Trends[68] reports**. While this data does not capture the total number of missing children, it provides valuable insight into the patterns, causes, and consequences of child disappearance. MCE generally identifies five categories of missing children: children who run away, children missing in migration, (international) parental child abduction, criminal abduction, and lost, injured, or otherwise missing children.



Without clear, comparable, and disaggregated data, it remains difficult to fully grasp the scale of child disappearance, understand why children go missing and develop effective prevention and protection strategies.

[67] European Commission (2013) Missing Children in the European Union: Mapping, Data Collection and Statistics.
[68] Missing Children Europe (2014-2026) Figures and Trends.

CHILDREN WHO RUN AWAY: THE LARGEST GROUP AMONG MISSING CHILDREN

MCE defines children who run away as all children who run away from, or are pushed out of their home or the institution where they have been placed. The **RADAR (Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses) project** research conducted in 2021 identified two main trajectories behind running away: **running from something** where children seek to escape a harmful situation or draw attention to a problem, and **running towards something**, where they attempt to reach a person or situation perceived as safer or more desirable.[69]

Children who run away represent the majority of missing children cases in Europe, consistently accounting for more than half of reported cases since 2014.[70] In 2024, roughly two-thirds of recorded cases involved children who had run away or been pushed out of their homes or care institutions (4,091 cases, or 67%). Despite this prevalence, running away is still often misperceived as a behavioural issue, and children are sometimes described as 'voluntarily missing', a term that overlooks the complex vulnerabilities and harms underlying these situations.[71]

The RADAR project also showed that **running away rarely results from a single factor, but rather from a combination of risks accumulating with time**, **including** problems at home, difficulties at school or in care settings, mental health challenges, relationship issues, substance use, peer pressure, and **exposure to online harm such as online grooming.** More broadly, running away can be understood as a symptom of adverse childhood experiences. Such experiences may contribute to children deciding to run away, but they can also arise or intensify during a missing episode, when children may be particularly exposed and vulnerable to offenders.[72]

[69] Missing Children Europe (2021) RADAR: Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses, p. 9.
[70] Missing Children Europe (2014–2025) Figures and Trends.
[71] Missing Children Europe (2021) RADAR: Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses, p. 8.
[72] Ibidem.

GROOMING AND CHILD DISAPPEARANCE

Research from the CESAGRAM project demonstrates a strong link between online grooming and child disappearance, showing that grooming can act both as a **risk factor for, and a consequence of, children going missing.** These phenomena are closely interconnected and often reinforce one another rather than occurring in isolation. A child's disappearance frequently reflects underlying vulnerabilities and harms, including exposure to grooming and sexual exploitation, which may occur before a child goes missing or during the missing episode itself. In this sense, grooming and disappearance form **part of the same continuum of risk and harm for children**.[73]

Children who run away are particularly exposed. Running away may occur as a direct consequence of grooming, while being missing can also increase a child's vulnerability to further grooming and exploitation. In the context of child disappearance, grooming is therefore most commonly linked to cases involving children who run away, with **three grooming-missing trajectories identified:**[74]

GROOMING AS A CAUSE FOR GOING MISSING

TYPE 1
PERSUADED TO RUN AWAY BY THE GROOMER

The child is manipulated, coerced, or emotionally persuaded by the groomer to leave home or their care environment. They may believe they are entering a trusting or romantic relationship, or that the groomer offers safety, affection, or understanding not found elsewhere.

TYPE 2
RUNNING AWAY FROM GROOMING FALLOUT

The child goes missing as a response to pressure, distress, or fear linked to ongoing grooming. This can include sexual extortion, blackmail, threats, fear of caregivers discovering existing communication with the groomer, or feelings of shame and anxiety about the consequences within their family or social circle.

GROOMING AS A CONSEQUENCE OF GOING MISSING

TYPE 3
VULNERABILITY TO GROOMING AFTER GOING MISSING

The child goes missing due to difficulties in their home or care environment, or other personal struggles, and becomes more vulnerable to grooming and exploitation while missing. Isolation, lack of support, and increased reliance on online communication can heighten this risk.

[73] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 10-12.
[74] Ibidem.

While grooming typically occurs in secrecy, **a missing episode is visible and can therefore represent an opportunity for intervention**. When a child goes missing, professionals, authorities, and caregivers are alerted and can take action to identify risks, provide support, and prevent further harm.

However, significant challenges remain in capturing the scale of grooming and its links to children going missing:

- Underreporting by victims, often due to fear, stigma, or lack of recognition of grooming behaviours, limits the visibility of the phenomenon.
- The absence of systematic and comparable data collection practices across Europe contributes to underestimations. Different actors use inconsistent operational definitions and indicators, and reporting systems are rarely harmonised, contributing to the underestimation of cases.[75] As a result, data is collected by multiple actors, but it remains fragmented and rarely centralised or systematically shared.

These limitations also affect the visibility of grooming in missing children cases. Grooming may be addressed by law enforcement and child protection services without being recorded in missing children datasets, while missing children hotlines may handle cases without identifying the grooming component. As a result, **data on the intersection between grooming and child disappearance is not yet systematically collected, leading to gaps in the available evidence at both national and European levels**.[76]

Limited awareness of frontline professionals further compounds the problem. Among child protection actors, law enforcement, and the public, awareness of grooming and its link to children going missing remains insufficient. As a result, grooming may not be identified or recorded when a child is reported missing, and data collectors may not systematically assess whether the child experienced grooming prior to the disappearance.

The lack of reliable, up-to-date, and comparable data has significant consequences for child protection. It obscures the identification of patterns and risk factors linking grooming to missing episodes, limits the early identification of children at heightened risk, and undermines the development of evidence-based prevention and response strategies. Ultimately, these gaps delay intervention, weaken protection mechanisms, and increase the risk and harm related to prolonged exploitation and repeated victimisation.[77]

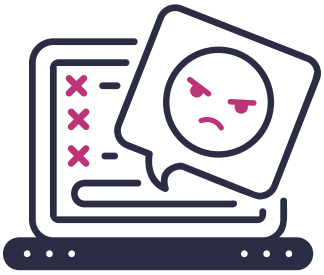
[75] Lanzarote Committee (2025) Data Collection Mechanisms on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, p. 6 and 10; Missing Children Europe (2025) Data Missing: Research Report: Towards Comparable and Intersectional Data on Missing Children in the European Union, pp. 7 and following.
[76] Missing Children Europe (2025) Data Missing: Research Report: Towards Comparable and Intersectional Data on Missing Children in the European Union, p. 30.
[77] Missing Children Europe (2025) Data Missing: Research Report: Towards Comparable and Intersectional Data on Missing Children in the European Union, pp. 7-9.

THE IMPACT OF GROOMING

The harms resulting from grooming are broad and varied, and can have profound short- and long-term consequences across **emotional, behavioural, and social domains**, even when the process is interrupted before physical abuse occurs.

All the survivors interviewed within the CESAGRAM project reported ongoing impact, underscoring the long-term nature of grooming-related harm.[78] While we acknowledge that the harms reported by those survivors do not capture the full spectrum of possible outcomes, their experiences illustrate that grooming often leads to **serious, diverse, and cumulative forms of victimisation.**

Importantly, **the fact that grooming occurs online does not diminish its harm**. Researchers and survivors strongly contest the perception that online abuse is less severe, emphasising, for example, that the ongoing circulation of child sexual abuse material resulting from the grooming process often can cause similar, or even greater, harm than hands-on abuse.[79-80] A distinctive feature of online grooming is indeed the persistence of this harm: abusive images or videos may remain accessible indefinitely, be repeatedly shared, or resurface unexpectedly, exposing children to ongoing or secondary victimisation and a sustained loss of control.[81]



Grooming causes profound, long-term harm, whether or not physical abuse occurs, and even when it happens online

[78] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 19-20.
[79] Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2017) International Survivors' Survey, pp. 147 and following.
[80] M. Joleby (2021) Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse, Department of psychology, University of Gothenburg, pp. 7-9.
[81] J. Von Weiler et al. (2010) Care and Treatment of Child Victims of Child Pornographic Exploitation in Germany, Journal of Sexual Aggression, pp. 211-222.

IMMEDIATE AND SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

In many cases, the outcome of the grooming process is **sexual abuse or exploitation**, which may occur online, offline, or across both contexts. Sexual abuse may include rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, or being coerced into producing, sharing or engaging in sexual activities, online or in person. Offenders frequently coerced or manipulated children into the production of child sexual abuse material, including depictions of sexual abuse and/or images focusing on a child's genitalia.[82] In some cases, this involved live-streamed abuse, while in others child sexual abuse material was produced during in-person encounters and later uploaded or circulated online.

Many survivors experienced **sexual extortion**, where child sexual abuse material or intimate images were used to blackmail them into further sexual acts, continued image production, or compliance with offenders' demands, including financial gain. This included threats of online dissemination, in-person stalking, or retaliation following perceived rejection. The non-consensual creation or (threatened) distribution of sexual images depicting the child, was also reported as a means of coercion to force compliance with the offenders' requests. These practices intensified victims' fear, isolation, and dependency on offenders.

Survivors interviewed in the CESAGRAM project also reported experiences consistent with the definition of **child trafficking** under the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons.[83] Some described being exploited for commercial purposes, such as being forced to exchange sexual acts for basic needs, including as a place to sleep, or being pressured to recruit other children for sexual exploitation. Some were also forced into criminal activities, including drug distribution. Grooming frequently served as a tool for both recruitment and control, a tactic increasingly observed in cross-border crimes. Some survivors described online child sexual abuse as 'transnational by default,' with offences often spanning multiple jurisdictions.[84] This risk is particularly acute in human trafficking cases, where children may be groomed online before being moved across borders.

[82] Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children (2025) Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2nd ed.

[83] United Nations General Assembly. (2000). Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. For the relevant definition in the European Union, see Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of 13 June 2024, which updates and replaces Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA.

[84] S. K. Witting (2021) Transnational by Default: Online Child Sexual Abuse Respects No Borders, The International Journal of Children's Rights, pp. 732-734.

IMPACT OF GROOMING ON CHILDREN

Survivors consistently described severe and enduring **emotional consequences** following grooming and, where relevant, associated missing episodes.[85] These included feelings of shame, guilt, self-blame, fear, and despair, as well as symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress. Many experience persistent difficulties with concentration, emotional regulation, and a sense of threat, sometimes years after the abuse.

These experiences align with broader evidence on the **psychological impacts** of sexual victimisation, including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders and substance misuse.[86] Importantly, evidence shows no clear relationship between the type of abuse and the severity of emotional impact, highlighting that grooming can cause serious harm even when no physical contact occurs.[87] Shame and guilt are particularly prominent in survivors' testimonies. These emotions are often deliberately fostered during the grooming process through manipulation, secrecy, and offender tactics, and may be reinforced by inadequate or harmful responses from adults and institutions following disclosure. Grooming can also lead to trauma bonding, a psychological attachment that develops through cycles of abuse combined with intermittent reassurance or affection. This dynamic can create emotional dependency and make it difficult for children to recognise exploitation or disengage from abusive relationships.[88]

Grooming is also associated with significant **behavioural consequences**. Survivors frequently report self-harm, substance misuse, antisocial behaviour and sexual practices that may put them at further risk, as coping responses to unresolved trauma.[89] Some also experience stress-related **physical symptoms** such as chronic fatigue, headaches, or digestive problems. Further evidence shows that victims of grooming may face heightened vulnerability to poly-victimisation, meaning that experiencing one form of sexual harm can increase the risk of further victimisation over time.[90]

[85] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 19-20.
[86] Victim Support Europe (2022) National Framework for Comprehensive Victim Support, pp. 23 and following. On the specific question of substance abuse see: B. Sabria et al. (2019) A systematic review of comprehensive interventions for substance abuse: Focus on victimization, Aggression and Violent Behavior, pp. 46-59.
[87] H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) Victims' Voices: The Impact of Online Grooming and Sexual Abuse, Universal Journal of psychology, p. 59.
[88] HEROES Project (2023) Novel Strategies to Fight Child Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking Crimes and Protect their Victims.
[89] M. R. Wolf and D. K Pruitt (2019) Grooming Hurts Too: The Effects of Types of Perpetrator Grooming on Trauma Symptoms in Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse.
[90] K. Alderson et al. (2022) Child Sexual Exploitation, Poly-Victimisation and Resilience, Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice, pp. 53-74.

The **social impact** of grooming can also be profound. Survivors often report stigmatisation, victim-blaming, and social exclusion from peers and institutions such as schools. Trauma-related symptoms may make social interaction more difficult and increase vulnerability to bullying, further reinforcing isolation. Disclosure can also affect family relationships: while some survivors receive support, others experience strained dynamics, overprotectiveness or, in some cases, blame or punishment. Many survivors report lasting difficulties with trust and intimacy, which can affect their ability to build and maintain friendships and romantic relationships.

The impact of grooming **extends beyond the individual child and often affects families, peers, and the wider community**. Caregivers may feel overwhelmed, helpless, or blame themselves for not recognising the abuse earlier, particularly as grooming often occurs online, in secrecy, and over long periods. Limited understanding of manipulation and coercion in digital environments, combined with gaps between children's online experiences and parental awareness, can make it difficult for families to respond effectively.[91] Communication may also be challenging after disclosure or after a child returns from a missing episode, as caregivers may fear retraumatising the child while children may feel shame, guilt, or fear of judgment. Supportive, calm, and validating parental responses are therefore crucial in helping children feel believed and protected.[92]

Supportive, calm, and validating responses are crucial in helping children feel believed and protected

[91] Terre des Hommes Netherlands et al. (2024) Speaking Up for Change: Children's and Caregivers' Voices for Safer Online Experiences, pp. 29 and following.

[92] M. Dolev-Cohen et al. (2024) Parental Responses to Online Sexual Grooming Events Experienced by Their Teenage Children, European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education, pp. 1315 and following.

THE ROLE OF PEERS

Peers play an important role in how children experience and respond to grooming. Many children first disclose abuse to someone their own age, such as a friend or sibling, before approaching adults.[93] Supportive peer reactions, such as listening without judgment, believing the child, and encouraging them to seek help, can reduce shame, counter isolation, and facilitate access to protection. Conversely, negative peer responses may increase social withdrawal, mistrust, and vulnerability, particularly when combined with feelings of shame or fear of stigma. At the community level, limited awareness and support around grooming can further isolate families and exacerbate the long-term impact of abuse.[94]

ADDITIONAL IMPACT WHEN GROOMING IS LINKED TO DISAPPEARANCE

When grooming leads to a child going missing, the harms associated with both experiences are compounded and intensified. **Missing episodes are not simply absences from home or care but high-risk events that expose children to further exploitation and victimisation**.[95]

While away, children may experience stress, fear, anger, guilt, and difficulty meeting basic needs like food and shelter, while simultaneously deepening their social and emotional vulnerability.[96] Going missing also exacerbates the psychological impact of grooming.

[93] N. Maney and D. Collin-Vézina (2021) Recipients of Children's and Adolescents' Disclosures of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Systematic Review, Child Abuse & Neglect.
[94] P. Boss (2017) Families of the Missing: Psychosocial Effects and Therapeutic Approaches, International Review of the Red Cross, p. 525.
[95] United Kingdom Parliament (2024) Written evidence from Missing People (CSC 135); Missing People and ECPAT UK (2022) Away and at risk: the scale of exploited children going missing from care in the UK (2018-2020).
[96] Missing Children Europe (2021) RADAR: Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses, pp. 73-77.

Feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, and trauma are often intensified, reinforcing the emotional manipulation and coercion already established through the grooming process. These effects do not necessarily end when a child returns. Instead, they can persist and interfere with recovery, trust-building, and help-seeking.[97]

Children who experience repeated missing episodes are often further harmed by stigmatising responses from professionals. Frustration, victim-blaming, assumptions that behaviour will not change, or a failure to recognise children as victims at risk can undermine access to support.[98] This erosion of trust between children and adults becomes a significant barrier to disclosure and engagement with services.[99] When a child's return does not lead to meaningful support or change, running away may be repeated as a coping strategy.

Over time, this contributes to cumulative psychological harm and increasing emotional instability, and has been linked to deteriorating mental health, including depression and suicidal thoughts. Fear of judgement, concerns about confidentiality, and anxiety about being forced to return home further discourage children from seeking help, reinforcing isolation and emotional withdrawal. In this context, **going missing functions not only as a risk factor for further harm, but as a psychologically destabilising experience that deepens the impact of grooming and complicates long-term recovery**.[100]

[97] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, p. 9.
[98] Missing Children Europe (2021) RADAR: Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses, p. 10.
[99] Ibidem, pp. 75-77.
[100] Ibidem.

RESPONSES TO GROOMING

Despite the growing prevalence of grooming, responses across Europe remain largely fragmented, reactive, and insufficiently coordinated. Addressing grooming and its consequences **requires an integrated approach that brings together improved prevention, detection, safe and accessible reporting mechanisms, child-friendly and trauma-informed law enforcement and judicial responses, and appropriate victim support services**. These elements must be coordinated coherently at both the EU and national level.

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

There is currently a solid legal framework at both international and European levels to protect children from sexual exploitation.

At the international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[101] and its 2000 Optional Protocol[102] establish children's right to protection from sexual exploitation and requirements for criminalisation, encompassing the digital sphere (reinforced by General Comment No. 25).[103] At the Council of Europe level, the Lanzarote Convention[104] obliges States to criminalise the solicitation of children for sexual abuse purposes, including proposals to meet a child with the intent of abuse. At EU level, legislative efforts aim to strengthen protection against online child sexual abuse and grooming, although gaps in harmonisation and implementation remain. Key legal instruments include the proposed Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse,[105] the recast of Directive 2011/93/EU,[106] and the Digital Services Act.[107]

Another key instrument of the European Union legal framework was the Interim Regulation (EU) 2021/1232,[108] which introduced a temporary derogation from certain requirements of the ePrivacy Directive.[109]

[101] United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entry into force 2 September 1990.
[102] United Nations (2000) Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography, Resolution A/RES/54/263 at the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly of the United States.
[103] Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021) General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment.
[104] Council of Europe (2007) Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.
[105] European Commission (2022) Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse.
[106] European Commission (2024) Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse material and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA, COM(2024) 60 final.
[107] Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC.
[108] Regulation (EU) 2024/1307 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2024 amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1232 on a temporary derogation from certain provisions of Directive 2002/58/EC as regards the use of technologies by providers of number-independent interpersonal communications services for the processing of personal and other data for the purpose of combating online child sexual abuse.
[109] Directive 2002/58/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 2002 concerning the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector (Directive on privacy and electronic communications).

For almost five years, it allowed providers of number-independent interpersonal communication services[110] to voluntarily use specific technologies to detect, reporting, and remove child sexual abuse material on their platforms. Conceived as a temporary solution pending the adoption of a comprehensive, long-term framework to combat online child sexual abuse, including grooming, the Interim Regulation expired on 3 April 2026.

In the absence of an agreed extension, due to political deadlock, and with negotiations on the proposed Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse still ongoing, a legal gap has emerged at the time of writing this report. This means that **online service providers are no longer able to carry out such detection and removal activities, raising serious concerns for the continuity of child protection online, with consequences in Europe and beyond.**[111] This gap is likely to persist until a long-term framework is adopted, a process that has already been ongoing since the Commission's proposal in 2022.

Alongside this evolving legal framework addressing child sexual exploitation, significant gaps remain in the understanding, detection, and legal coverage of grooming.

A key challenge concerns the fragmented and insufficiently harmonised collection of data on online grooming across Europe. Information is currently gathered through a variety of mechanisms involving online platforms, law enforcement authorities, civil society organisations, and research institutions. However, these sources remain highly fragmented and difficult to compare across countries, given the lack of harmonised classification of technology-facilitated violence against children at the international level.[112] Few States have data collection mechanisms dedicated solely to child sexual exploitation and abuse. A 2025 study found that, while most States collect some data on child sexual exploitation and abuse, this is generally done through broader criminal statistics rather than specialised mechanisms.[113] Data collection is often limited to police or judicial authorities, rarely consolidated in a single system, and collaboration with civil society organisations remains limited.[114] As a result, **no comprehensive and comparable international nor EU-wide dataset exists on online grooming, or its link with children going missing, and the lack of harmonised definitions and indicators makes it difficult to assess trends or design targeted policy responses.**

[110] As defined in Directive (EU) 2018/1972 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2018 establishing the European Electronic Communications Code (Recast).
[111] ECLAG (2026) Joint Statement: This is sadly no April Fool's joke: Europe is switching its detection of child sexual abuse online off.
[112] UNICEF (2025) Measuring Technology-facilitated Violence against Children in Line with the International Classification of Violence against Children.
[113] Council of Europe (2025) Data Collection Mechanisms on Child Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.
[114] Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (2019) Improving Understanding of the Scale and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse, Characteristics and Experiences of Children and Young People Attending Saint Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre.

In addition to these knowledge gaps, important legal limitations persist in the current framework addressing grooming. Both Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children (Article 6) and the Lanzarote Convention (Article 23) criminalise grooming, but primarily in cases where **an adult meets a child to engage** in sexual abuse activities or produce child sexual abuse materials **with a child who has not reached the age of sexual consent. This creates a protection gap in two respects.**

First, **because it links the offence to the age of sexual consent rather than protecting all children under 18.** This limitation is concerning, as research shows that grooming is not constrained by age or duration. Children may be targeted when they are below the age of sexual consent, but the abuse can continue for years, leaving them unprotected once they reach age of sexual consent set in their countries. Basing protection solely on age overlooks children's development, maturity, and ongoing psychological vulnerability, exposing older minors to exploitation and creating unequal levels of protection inconsistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Second, **because it frames grooming in the context of proposals to meet a child and requires material acts leading to an in-person meeting for the conduct to be punishable**. Although the Lanzarote Committee has encouraged extending the criminalisation to include cases where sexual abuse is not the result of in-person meeting,[115] this opinion is not currently binding. Yet this approach does not fully reflect current patterns of abuse, as child sexual exploitation and abuse increasingly occurs online. Many forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation, including the coercion of children to perform sexual abuse acts or share abuse material, occur entirely online,[116] with no intention of a physical meeting. Limiting protection to cases involving in-person meetings excludes many victims whose images or videos are created and shared online, underestimating and failing to recognise the harm online abuse causes.

Current legal frameworks leave protection gaps by limiting grooming offences to age of consent and in-person meetings, excluding some children and cases of online-only abuse

[115] Lanzarote Committee (2016) Opinion on Article 23 of the Lanzarote Convention and its Explanatory Note.
[116] See for instance K. Chauviré-Geib et al. (2025) Associations Between Online Child Sexual Solicitation and Abuse and Offline Child Maltreatment: A Latent Class Analysis, European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.

These two limitations appear inconsistent with the scope of protection granted by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that all children under 18 should be protected from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Operational gaps also persist regarding **the detection of grooming online at EU level**. With the expiration of the Interim Regulation (EU) 2021/1232, the voluntary detection of both child sexual abuse material and grooming is no longer legally permitted in the EU. Meanwhile, in the ongoing negotiations on the Proposed Child Sexual Abuse Regulation, grooming detection is currently excluded, even though the impact assessment conducted prior to the negotiations concluded that EU action is necessary to detect child grooming.[117] Consequently, **no comprehensive and harmonised EU framework currently exists to ensure the systematic detection and prevention of grooming online**.

Together, these legal, operational, and knowledge gaps limit the ability of policymakers and practitioners to fully understand the scale and nature of grooming and to ensure consistent and sufficient protection for all children across the European Union.

PREVENTION AND EARLY IDENTIFICATION

Despite growing attention to online harms, grooming remains poorly understood by children, families, caregivers, professionals, and the wider public, including in relation to its links with sexual exploitation, abuse, and children going missing. Findings from the CESAGRAM project show that these gaps in understanding often delay or prevent disclosure, as children fear shame, self-blame, or not being believed.[118] As a result, **prevention and early recognition of grooming are highly challenging, but remain essential to preventing harm.**

Current prevention efforts are often fragmented, short-term, and project-based, relying on unstable funding that limits continuity, geographic reach, and long-term impact. Initiatives also rarely involve children or survivors in a meaningful way: tools and messages are typically developed for children rather than with them, reducing relevance, trust, and engagement, particularly for vulnerable groups. Prevention programmes rarely actively incorporate survivors' experiences, although they should instead build on community-, family-, and peer-based approaches, grounded in trauma-informed, child-centred principles.

[117] European Union Parliamentary Research Service (2026) Combating Child Sexual Abuse Online, Briefing.
[118] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, p. 15.

At the same time, the prevalence of grooming in online environments means that digital services play a central role in shaping children's safety and in preventing harm. Yet **many online platforms still fail to provide safe-by-design services, missing opportunities to protect children proactively**, even though the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 25, recognises safety-by-design as essential to safeguarding children's rights.[119]

CHILD-CENTRED REPORTING AND SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

Reporting is a critical gateway to protection, support, and justice for children experiencing grooming and sexual violence. However, many children do not disclose abuse while it is ongoing, or only do so when the situation becomes unbearable or dangerous, or much later once the abuse has ended.

Survivors' testimonies from the CESAGRAM project show that disclosure rarely occurs early. Instead, it often emerges as a last resort, when psychological distress or external threats reach a breaking point.[120] This gap between harm and reporting reflects systemic shortcomings in how reporting pathways are designed, communicated, and trusted, rather than individual failure.

As explained above, several barriers prevent children from reporting grooming. Many victims do not recognise grooming as abuse, as it develops gradually through manipulation. Emotional and relational dynamics further inhibit disclosure, with survivors frequently reporting shame, self-blame, fear of disbelief, emotional dependence on the offender, and the absence of a trusted adult or peer. As a result, disclosure often occurs only under extreme pressure, such as severe mental distress, imminent danger, or during a missing episode. Fear of being blamed, judged, or punished, particularly in cases involving online interactions, can further discourage reporting.

Barriers to reporting can be even stronger in online environments. While online platforms increasingly provide reporting tools, these mechanisms vary widely in accessibility, clarity, and effectiveness. Children may distrust online platform systems, fear retaliation or account consequences, or doubt that reporting will lead to meaningful action. Moreover, many reporting tools rely on victims recognising abuse and feeling confident enough to report it, which is particularly difficult in grooming cases involving manipulation and emotional dependency.

[119] Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021) General comment No. 25 (2021) on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment.
[120] R. McElvaney et al. (2012) Containing the secret of child sexual abuse. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, pp. 1155-1175.

Complex procedures, lack of anonymity, and limited feedback after reporting further discourage children from seeking help,[121] while reports submitted through online platforms are not always effectively connected to child protection services or law enforcement.[122]

Accessible and trusted support services are therefore essential. Across Europe, child helplines and missing children's hotlines already provide low-threshold, confidential, and child-friendly entry points into child protection systems. Services such as the **116 000 hotline for missing children,[123] the 116 111 child helpline,[124] the INSAFE helplines and INHOPE hotlines,**[125] offer accessible entry points, providing free emotional, psychological, and practical support to children, families, and third parties. By offering trauma-informed counselling, guidance, and referral to specialised services and authorities, these services help ensure that disclosures lead to timely protection and access to support. However, despite their essential role, these services often developed in a fragmented and reactive manner, and funding remains a persistent structural challenge.

Beyond this first point of contact and support, **some children who disclose may also come into contact with the criminal justice system**. At this stage, the quality of interactions with law enforcement and judicial actors directly affects their recovery: positive engagement can empower and protect victims, while insensitive or dismissive treatment can cause further trauma and discourage reporting.[126] Despite the minimum standards guaranteed to children under the Victims' Rights Directive, including being treated with dignity and respect, having access to appropriate support throughout judicial proceedings, and being protected from secondary victimisation,[127] **survivors frequently report negative experiences with the criminal justice system**.[128] Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judges may lack specialised knowledge of grooming dynamics and child vulnerabilities, resulting in case minimisation, delays, or dismissal. Delays in court proceedings, inconsistent sentencing, and lack of communication not only undermine recovery, confidence in the justice system, and willingness to report future incidents, but they also increase the long-term mental health harm that results from child sexual abuse.

[121] Internet Matters (2025) Understanding and improving how children report online harm, data briefing.
[122] Global Platform for Child Exploitation Policy (s.d.) Reporting by Online Platforms.
[123] 116 000 hotline for missing children has been designed to report missing children and provide social support services for children and families when a child goes missing. It is available across all EU countries and allows people to report a missing child while also offering guidance and support to the child's family.
[124] 116 111 child helpline is a free and confidential service across Europe where children and young people can talk about any issue via phone, chat or other channels, operated nationally by members of Child Helpline International.
[125] INSAFE and INHOPE work together through Safer Internet Centres across Europe, which combines awareness centres (education and campaigns), helplines (advice and support on online risks), hotlines (anonymous reporting of illegal content), and youth panels (young people sharing insights and promoting online safety). Together, they inform and support children, parents and educators on digital issues and combat online child sexual abuse by combining awareness centres and helplines (run by INSAFE) with hotlines (run by INHOPE).
[126] Victim Support Europe (2022) National Framework for Comprehensive Victim Support, pp. 52-58.
[127] Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA.
[128] Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 18 and following.

COORDINATED MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSES

Multi-agency cooperation involves coordinated collaboration between actors involved in child protection, including law enforcement, child protection services, health professionals, educators, the judiciary, NGOs, and specialised support services.[129] Such **cooperation is central to effective safeguarding, as it enables professionals to share information, understand a child's situation holistically, and provide timely, coordinated support**.[130] The EU Strategy for a More Effective Fight Against Child Sexual Abuse emphasises that tackling child sexual abuse requires cooperation across sectors and stakeholders,[131] including the 116 000 missing children hotline, which supports families and facilitates communication with authorities. Within the ecosystem, hotlines and helplines act as low-threshold entry points, connecting children and families with child protection services, law enforcement, and specialised support providers, contributing to multi-agency responses.

However, the effectiveness of multi-agency responses is often limited by systemic barriers. Variations in definitions, unclear allocation of roles, inconsistent referral procedures, and insufficient communication between sectors can slow down interventions and result in missed opportunities to detect grooming risks. Limited interoperability between information systems, gaps in operational capacity, and fragmented funding affect all actors, from frontline services to specialised agencies, weakening their ability to respond in a timely and coordinated manner.[132]

Addressing these challenges requires improving cooperation, information sharing, and the long-term sustainability of specialised services. Effective multi-agency mechanisms depend on a clear understanding of national resources, supportive legislative and policy frameworks, adequate funding, and trust-based working relationships between organisations. Coordination can be reinforced through national and international bodies, inter-agency meetings, knowledge-sharing initiatives, formal agreements, and jointly developed service quality standards with monitoring arrangements.[133]

[129] National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2023) Multi-agency and interdisciplinary working in child protection.
[130] P. Sidebotham et al. (2016) Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014: final report, London: Department for Education.
[131] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, EU Strategy for a More Effective Fight Against Child Sexual Abuse, point II.
[132] Ibidem; M. Gonzalez José Prieto (2016) Multi-Agency Approach: Problems and opportunities in the application of a multi-agency approach.
[133] Victim Support Europe (2022) National Framework for Comprehensive Victim Support, pp. 42 and following.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A STRONG LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

ENSURE COMPREHENSIVE CRIMINALISATION OF GROOMING TO PROTECT ALL CHILDREN UNDER 18, INCLUDING WHEN ABUSE OCCURS ENTIRELY ONLINE

EU institutions should ensure that grooming is criminalised for all children under 18, irrespective of the age of sexual consent or whether a meeting between the child and the offender occurs. The legal framework should be strengthened to extend criminalisation beyond the age of consent and explicitly cover online-only abuse, including cases where no in-person meeting is proposed. This would better reflect the evolving nature of abuse in digital environments, close existing gaps, and align with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

ESTABLISH A COMPREHENSIVE EU LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE DETECTION OF ONLINE GROOMING

EU institutions should ensure that the detection of grooming is explicitly included within the scope of the proposed the proposed Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse. Enabling the detection of grooming behaviours is essential for early intervention, allowing authorities and service providers to identify and disrupt abusive dynamics before they escalate into child sexual abuse.

This capability, which was previously permitted under the Interim Regulation for the voluntary detection of known and unknown child sexual abuse material and grooming, expired on 3 April 2026, and negotiations for a long-term replacement are still ongoing at the time of writing this report. Without clear provisions in the new Regulation, a significant enforcement gap will remain. Including grooming detection within the scope would therefore ensure continuity of protection, strengthen prevention efforts, and contribute to reducing harm to children in digital environments.

IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION ON GROOMING AND ASSOCIATED RISKS, INCLUDING CHILD DISAPPEARANCE

EU institutions should require Member States to annually collect and report comparable statistical data on online grooming and child disappearances. Currently, information remains fragmented across law enforcement authorities, online platforms, civil society organisations, and academic or policy research institutions, and is rarely consolidated or comparable. The EU should therefore establish a coordinated data collection framework based on harmonised definitions, shared indicators, and common reporting protocols across relevant stakeholders, including law enforcement, child protection services, hotlines, and digital platforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON PREVENTION AND EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF ONLINE GROOMING

STRENGTHEN PREVENTION AND AWARENESS OF GROOMING AND RELATED RISKS, INCLUDING CHILD DISAPPEARANCE

Member States should ensure a comprehensive and preventive approach to online child protection by providing all children with age-appropriate digital literacy, as well as relational, emotional, and comprehensive sexuality education from an early age. This education should reflect the evolving nature of online risks and developed and, where possible, be co-created with children to enhance relevance and engagement.

At the same time, teachers, parents, caregivers, and social workers should receive clear guidance and training to recognise online risks, grooming dynamics, and their links to child disappearance, alongside strengthened digital literacy to support open and informed discussions and to guide children towards appropriate reporting channels. In parallel, law enforcement authorities should benefit from continuous, mandatory training on grooming, its consequences and links to disappearance, as well as on trauma-informed approaches and children's rights, to ensure child-friendly, consistent, and non-blaming responses.

STRENGTHEN CHILD-SAFETY-BY-DESIGN ON ONLINE PLATFORMS

In line with the Digital Services Act and the European Commission's guidelines on measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors online, the European Commission and National Digital Services Coordinators should actively monitor and exercise their respective supervisory and enforcement powers to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors, in particular by addressing risks such as grooming and unwanted contact, within the scope of their competences.

Online platforms should implement appropriate and proportionate measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors, including privacy-by-default settings, tools to easily block or mute users, and safeguards to prevent unwanted contact. They should provide effective, child-friendly reporting and complaint mechanisms, ensuring timely responses without adverse consequences for the child, as well as clear and accessible information on support services such as the 116 000 missing children hotlines and the 116 111 child helpline. Where appropriate, online platforms should involve children in the design of safety features to enhance their relevance, trustworthiness and effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATION ON CHILD-CENTRED REPORTING AND SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

STRENGTHEN ACCESSIBLE, CHILD-CENTRED REPORTING AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS

The EU and Member States should ensure that all children have access to low-threshold, confidential, and trauma-informed reporting and support services, including missing children hotlines and child helplines, which provide guidance, counselling, and referral to specialised services. Facilitating the reporting of grooming is essential for early detection and intervention, enabling harmful situations to be identified and addressed before they escalate into more severe forms of abuse.

In addition to platform-based reporting tools, Member States should establish, support and strengthen new or existing reporting channels to ensure that children can report harmful behaviours and seek help in ways that match their needs. This should include in-person support, online, chat, messages and any other means that can be helpful for making reporting easier.

These mechanisms must be sustainably funded and adequately staffed with trained professionals to deliver timely, child-friendly and trauma-informed responses, prevent secondary harm, and support early intervention in grooming situations. Particular attention should be given to securing long-term funding for key services, including 116 000 missing children hotlines, 116 111 child helplines, and Safer Internet Centres.

RECOMMENDATION ON MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE

STRENGTHEN COORDINATED MULTI-AGENCY COOPERATION TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY TO THE RISKS OF GROOMING

EU policymakers and Member States should ensure structured and systematic cooperation among all actors involved in responding to grooming, including online platforms, law enforcement agencies, child protection services, and relevant civil society organisations including hotlines and helplines for children.

Services such as 116 000 hotlines, INSAFE helplines, and INHOPE hotlines play complementary roles in identifying risks, supporting children and families, and facilitating intervention, and should be enabled to cooperate closely through clear referral pathways, shared standards, and real-time information exchange, in full compliance with data protection and child rights principles. Strengthening this coordinated approach is essential to ensure timely, consistent and child-centred responses, bridging online and offline protection systems and reducing the risk of harm, including child disappearance.

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