MOLDOVA

La Strada

CHILDREN IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: ALONE ONLINE? SAFE ONLINE?

A study on children's safety online

Enter

Chisinau 2011

This Report is based on data obtained as a result of a study on children's safety online in the Republic of Moldova conducted by the International Center for Women Rights Protection and Promotion "La Strada".
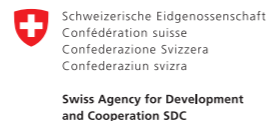
For more information on this publication please contact us at:
The Republic of Moldova, Chisinau, MD-2012, P.O. Box 259.
Tel.: (+373 22) 23 49 06
Fax: (+373 22) 23 49 07
E-mail: office@lastrada.md
Web Site: www.lastrada.md

Hot Line: 0 800 77777 (free of charge throughout Moldova)
                +(373 22) 23 49 06 (for international calls)
Skype: Consultant 0 800 77777

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of figures and tables included in the Report

Note on the publication

Note on the Publication

The exponential growth of the role of new information technologies in the daily life does not impress us any longer and is turning normal. We have already got used to the fact that even children, or maybe especially children, penetrate in the secrets of this virtual space much easier and are easier and smarter at using it compared to many adults. At the same time, usage of new information technologies, especially of the Internet, has its hidden faces. In recent years, the aspects of children's safety online become an increasing concern for parents and teachers in many countries. Being a part of the geocybernetic space and subject to the effect of technological globalisation, the Republic of Moldova also inevitably confronts this problem that is related to citizens of fragile age.

On the other hand, the numerous social campaigns conducted by the International Center "La Strada" that were focused on awareness raising of the wide public about the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings, particularly child trafficking and its prevention, brought about the necessity to extend the sphere of activity on the forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children. And though it came into the view relatively recently, commercial sexual exploitation of children, with its various forms of manifestation, particularly by means of information technologies, has become one of the lines of activity of the Center lately. In 2011, the members of the «La Strada» Center organised dozens of awareness-raising seminars for adolescents on the multiple risks that they are exposed to online and about the aspects of safe use of the Internet. These awareness-raising and prevention activities were fully supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic Moldova - a long-standing partner of the International Center "La Strada" in awareness-raising campaigns on the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings organised for vulnerable groups, and recently – also in the information activities for children related to safe behaviour online.

The idea of summarising the information on the aspects of children's safety online in the framework of a study conducted in parallel with awareness-raising seminars emerged after the first information events, where children described some quite interesting and equally worrying things about their behaviour online. Since at the national level, there is no statistical data or research that would cover children's interaction with the virtual world, we were convinced that this idea is exactly in line with the need to know children's behaviour online that involves certain risks that children are not aware of, as well as the need to develop certain risk prevention and mitigation strategies. Therefore, this study is absolutely necessary, it is a useful argument in raising parents', teachers', and the wider public's awareness, as well as a provision for the mobilisation of resources for the purpose of studying the topic of children's safety online.

It should be mentioned that informing children was the primary goal of the awareness-raising activities, while questioning of children were part of these activities that have been approved by parents. It should also be noted that in the present Report, the term "child" refers only to human beings aged 12-16 who attend pre-university educational institutions in the Republic and are exactly the target group of the respective study.

The present Report is intended to inform the teaching staff, parents, people involved in the process of children's education, including civil society representatives, about the online behaviour of children in the Republic of Moldova. However, the details of the study will hopefully give an impulse for unification and consolidation of the efforts of all actors focused exactly on children - active users of new information technologies.

The very content of the Report is divided into four chapters. Chapter I brings to the reader's attention theoretical aspects of addressing the problem of children's safety online. Chapter II covers the study's goals and methodology. Chapter III brings forward the results of the present study, while the last Chapter, the fourth one, includes a set of recommendations for different actors in the field.

Bearing in mind difficulties related to studying children's experience of navigation online, as well as the limited availability of information that we used for the analysis, we would appreciate any comments on the content of the present publication, as well as any additional information on children's behaviour online and the risks that they face. Therefore, we would be glad to receive your opinions at the address of the Analytical Department of the International Center "La Strada" specified on page 2 of the present publication.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

This study became possible because of contributions of many persons and institutions and we would like to express our sincere gratitude to them. First of all, we are glad for the opening and support granted by the Ministry of Education of the Republic Moldova. We also express our sincere acknowledgements to professors of computer sciences from different lyceums of the Republic for the information made available by them in the framework of individual interviews on the aspects of monitoring and facilitation of safe access of the Internet by adolescents: *Ms Nina Bulduma,* "Grigore Vieru" lyceum from the town of Briceni; *Ms Maria Cazac*, theoretical lyceum "Mihai Sadoveanu" from the town of Ocnita; *Mr. Sergiu Chilimicenco*, theoretical lyceum No. 2 from the town of Vulcanesti; *Ms Valentina Concescu,* theoretical lyceum "Stefan cel Mare" from the town of Drochia; *Ms Tatiana Eus*, theoretical lyceum "Mihail Lomonosov" from the town of Hîncesti; *Ms Olga Ganga*, theoretical lyceum "Petru Rares" from the town of Soroca; *Ms Viorica Goncear*, theoretical lyceum from the town of Ialoveni; *Ms Ludmila Ionas*, theoretical lyceum "Petre Stefanuca" from the town of Ialoveni; *Mr. Sergiu Jitari*, theoretical lyceum "Lucian Blaga" from the town of Balti; *Ms Ala Nebunu*, theoretical lyceum "Dimitrie Cantemir" from the town of Cahul; *Ms Lilia Petic,* theoretical lyceum "Mihai Eminescu" from the town of Ungheni; *Ms Svetlana Rogate*, theoretical lyceum "Alecu Russo" from the town of Orhei; *Ms Svetlana Rudoi*, "Mihai Eminescu" lyceum from the town of Chisinau; *Mr. Sergiu Sulima*, theoretical lyceum "Ion Creanga" from the town of Floresti; *Ms Ala Burusciuc*, theoretical lyceum "A. Cehov" from the town of Floresti; *Ms Irina Mazurova*, theoretical lyceum "Alexandr Puskin" from the town of Causeni. We would also like to express our sincere acknowledgements to the activists of non-governmental organisations, who operate youth-oriented awareness-raising programmes in the framework of community centers: *Ms Oxana Zavidei and Ms Lilia Hropotinschi,* NGO "Stimul" from the town of Ocnita; *Mr. Sergiu Gurău*, the President of the non-governmental organisation "Eco-Răzeni"/Youth Information and Training Center "Valul III" from the Răzeni community, region of Ialoveni; *Ms Maria Boico*, the President of the non-governmental organisation "Generatia mea" [My Generation]/Youth Community Centre for Access to Information and Training "Amicul" [Friend] from the community of Gratiesti.

We hold to express our gratitude to the team of volunteers of the of the International Center "La Strada" who conducted series of awareness-raising events for children from lyceums on the topic of online safety and, in parallel, served as field operators in the process of this study and organised focus-groups with children. We extend our gratitude to *Ms Anastasia Oceretnii*, Doctor of Sociology, Head of Sociology Chair, Department of Sociology and Social Assistance of the State University of Moldova, for the

support offered in the process of development of the study's methodology and revision of initial versions of this Report.

Finally, we express our sincere acknowledgements to children themselves, those who took part in this study – both for the information, that we hope was provided sincerely, and for their openness to learning new no-risk behaviour patterns. We cannot but thank their parents too, who proved to be concerned about the fate of their children through cooperation in this study. Through this cooperation, both parents

and professors showed their concern also about the fate of other children – those who will be involved in future awareness-raising programmes related to safe online navigation.

And, finally, we are convinced that the present study will allow us to understand better problems faced by the children surfing in the Internet, and, as a consequence, develop efficient campaigns to prevent the risk of sexual abuse of children through information technologies and suggest timely adequate solutions to those who had unpleasant experience online.

Executive summary

Executive Summary

The present Report was put together based on data obtained from a study of aspects of children's safety online in the Republic of Moldova conducted by the International Center "La Strada" and aimed at collecting information on children's behaviour online. Based on the results of the study, the report includes a number of recommendations for specialists interested in prevention of children's risky online behaviour, recommendations that can facilitate development of effective national campaigns in this field.

- **Research methods** included interviewing children from a representative sample of 1,347 children-users of the Internet from 59 localities of the Republic of Moldova, interviews with 20 specialists from 20 localities of the country, focus-groups in 8 urban and rural centres from different zones of the Republic and documentary analysis (reports on seminars on online safety for children and written mass-media articles).
- **The focus of the study was the analysis of the main online risks:** contacting persons that children do not really know, sexually-coloured communication and indecent proposals online, exchange of personal information, pictures and video with people known online, online access to pornographic materials and cyberbullying.

For the purpose of the present report "children" shall mean persons from the Republic of Moldova aged from 12 to 16, who use the Internet regardless of technical means and place of access.

Accessing the Internet and online activities

- **The Internet has become an integral part of the daily life of children.** Around 80% of children from urban localities and about 70% from rural localities have access to the Internet.
- **Access hours**. Approximately 84% of children access the Internet in the 14:00-22:00 time period, app. 10% access it at 22:00-08:00, and 6% of children reported accessing the Internet between 08:00 and 14:00.
- **Ways of access.** 3/4 of children access the Internet at home, the rest – at friends, at school and in Internet-cafes.
- **Length of access.** Most of the children spend 3-4 hours in the Internet from the moment of access, and one in 7 children spend 5-6 hours on the net, one in 17 – 7-8 hours continuously in the 22:00-8:00 timeframe.
- **The main goals of accessing the Internet.** The use of the Internet implied differentiation into 11 categories of answers provided by children, where the most frequent answer was visiting the personal profile in social networks – 90%, searching for the information to do their homework – 89%, online sending/receiving of messages – 77%, watching video clips/films – 76%, using web-camera – 48% (including one in ten children using the camera at night),

online games – 44%, reading/watching news on the Internet – 42%, sending/receiving e-mail messages – 36%, telephone calls – 35%, communication via blogs – 12% or chat – 11%. Four in ten children use social networking sites to communicate with persons from other countries whom they came to know online, with other persons, whom they met online or someone they used to know in reality before communicating with them in the Internet. The top most popular sites are *www.odnoklassniki.ru, www.facebook.com, www.formspring.com and www.vkontakte.ru*. 2/3 of the interviewed children prefer to communicate with their peers rather online than offline.

- **Monitoring online activity by parents and professors.** While access to the Internet at school and youth centres is supervised, then most of children's online behaviour at home falls out of their parents' or relatives' attention.

Online children's behaviour

1. **Contacting persons that children do not know in reality**. Eight in ten questioned children reported that over the last year, they have been looking for new acquaintances on the Internet and added persons they had never met in reality to their personal profile in the social network, in the friends' list. The same number of children stated at the awareness-raising seminars that unknown persons contacted them online (from other countries and from the Republic of Moldova). Of the total number of interviewed children, 79% came to know persons from other countries (not relatives) through the Internet.

2. **Sexually-coloured communication online and indecent proposals**. Report on the awareness-raising seminars show that one in ten children who made acquaintances online with persons from other countries received an indecent proposal online. According to the results of the questionaries, online proposals made to children by persons from other countries regarded exchange of personal photos – 23%, exchange of contacts – 22%, proposals to meet – 21%, exchange links/web-sites and files – 15%, as well as indecent proposals – 7%. Topics of communication with persons from other countries, whom the interviewed children met on the Internet and communicated online with included music/photos/games – 28%, hobby – 18%, studies – 14%, relations with a friend – 13% and sexual topics – 6%. Four in ten interviewed children recognise having exchanged compliments online with unknown persons of the opposite sex.

3. **Exchange of personal data, photos and video with persons they come to know online.** Among those 4 in 10 children say that they exchanged data with persons they only communicated in the net. Every third interviewed child sent personal pictures, and one in six sent videos to persons whom they knew only from the Internet. Every fourth child preferred being represented in the net as some other person, other than real.

4. **Meeting offline the persons known only online**. Among the questioned children, 5 in 10 indicated having met at least once in reality with someone they met through the Internet, and one in ten children mentioned they did not meet, but had or have such intention at the time of the questioning. The geography of persons known online and met offline varies, with top list including the Russian Federation, Romania and Italy. Research data show that only 32% of children inform their parents about meeting offline with persons known online; 61% of children tell about this to a friend, 30% tell to peers, 17% – to an adult they trust, and 18% do not tell anything to anyone. The results of the interview show that in 48% of the cases, the age of persons that children came to know online and met offline was most often similar to their own age, in 43% of the cases they were 16-20 years old, in 4% – 21-25 and in the remaining 4% – 26-38 years old. Children that meet offline with persons they came to know online are most often girls aged between 15 -16 y.o., mostly from the rural areas.

5. **Accessing online pornographic materials.** Though interviewing children did not address this subject matter, qualitative data obtained from interviews with specialists, from discus-sions in focus-groups with children and from seminar reports demonstrate that most of the children of the sample age accessed such materials, voluntarily or involuntarily.

6. **Cyberbullying.** In the process of the study, children and specialists reported situations where children were stolen their profiles from social web-sites, the new profiles were created with uncensored/slanderous information or indecent images posted on it.

The role of parents and teachers in reducing the risks faced by children online

The study data show that when adults open the world of the Internet to children, these children often do not receive any indications on how to behave online. Most specialists showed concern about the risk for the mental development of children that have free access to pornographic sites or play online games with aggressive content. According to most interviewed specialists, in order to reduce online risks for children-users of the Internet, both in the family environment and at school, installation of special filters would be very useful. Almost all professors of computer sciences welcomed the idea of including one hour dedicated especially to safety online in the curriculum under the "Computer Science" curricula.

I. Children's safety online – conceptual notes and actual approach

I. Children's safety online – conceptual notes and actual approach

Safety is a feeling of security and a right indispensable for any person regardless of age, financial status, origin or social status. Harmonious psycho-emotional development of children is the main concern for parents and teachers, it forms the basis for own safe future, as well as for the safety of the coming generations, of the whole society. Parents feel secure when they know that their children are at home – either watching TV, or navigating the Internet – their physical presence at home normally gives them a feeling of safety with respect to their children. They recognise that beyond the parents' nest they cannot control real risks that can endanger children, and especially adolescents in their process of maturation (often difficult). A house locked day and night seems to impart a deeper feeling of physical security for family members, separating them from the outer world abundant of criminogenic situations and other unpleasant things. Many parents, however, do not recognise that their children, placed in the family environment in front of a computer, are absorbed by another world, cyber world, which does not have fewer traps and dangers.

The global network of the Internet offers excellent opportunities for children that are looking for information necessary to prepare their homework, who want to find and communicate with people from other countries, create personal pages on so-cial networking sites and have fun online. At the same time, these opportunities can be considered quite problematic: how can children remain safe in this virtual, global and boundless space? The risks that children face online vary from verbal aggression and defamation to online recruiting of children for the purpose of sexual exploitation. By means of a mouse, young people make virtual actions that can have, however, real consequences for their psycho-emotional development.

How much time do children spend on the Internet, what are the goals of using the Internet, what kind of actions do they undertake when accessing the Internet, via what channels of the Internet do they communicate with strangers and friends, what proposals do they receive online from different persons and what are the topics of communication between them? Do children meet offline with persons they come to know online and do they inform their parents about that? These are only some of the questions that we need to know the answers to in order to understand what risks children are exposed to and, respectively, to build efficient campaigns to prevent these risks.

Children rarely really know or recognise the risks that they face online, while their parents – either not recognise them too or do not know any technical possibilities to address these risks. To ensure online protection of children, close cooperation is needed between parents, the public and private sector and children themselves, the very users or potential users of the Internet.

In Moldova, the problem of children's safety online is barely starting to be recognised by the teaching staff and parents. In 2011, at the initiative of the International Center "La Strada" and with its didactic and methodological support and with the assistance of the Ministry of Education of the Republic Moldova, an awareness-raising programme was launched at the national level for school-children of the VI-IXth year of study about safety online aspects. Both children and teachers, parents expressly supported this initiative considering it to be very important and useful for children.

The "*EU Kids Online II: Enhancing Knowledge Regarding European Children's Use, Risk and Safety Online*" study[1] conducted in 25 European countries allowed demonstrating a number of risks faced online by children in the European space. It should be mentioned, that children's safety online is a subject matter that is at the front burner and being intensely addressed in the European countries, where parents, teachers and activists of the civil society have joined their efforts in this direction. The European Commission Programme "Safer Internet" is a multiyear programme covering protection of children-users of the Internet and other communication technologies and offering, in this context, the raising of public awareness, promotion and facilitation of initiatives aimed at self-regulation in this field and involvement of children in the creation

of safer online environment, ensuring public opinion through a network of contact points receiving reports on illegal and dangerous content and behaviour, especially in the case of materials with images abusive for children, grooming for the purpose of sexual abuse of children, as well as sexual intimidation online, establishment of a database on new trends in the use of technologies online and their implications for the lives of children. Thanks to this Programme, practically all European countries strengthened their efforts to combat these phenomena by establishing efficient partnerships between state institutions, the civil society and the business environment. Step by step these practices can be reproduced also in the Republic of Moldova.

The rate at which children and adolescents learn to access online information portals, combined communication means, ways of information sharing through social networks and mobiles is unprecedented in the history of technological innovation. Parents, professors and children learn how to use the Internet in their daily lives. Various actors – representatives of the government, education system, industry, organisations advocating for the rights of children and family – tend to maximise online opportunities, at the same time minimising the risk of harm associated with the use of the Internet. In many countries various ambitious efforts of promotion of digital technologies are made

at schools, initiatives of establishment of Electronic Governments by means of digital technologies, consolidation of skills in the field of knowledge of digital technologies. Discovered by many families, these benefits are significant. New opportunities of learning, manifestation of creativity and communication are explored by children, parents, schools, organisations from the public and private sector.[2] The Internet is an instrument of democratisation – in some countries it offers a possibility to have access also to sources of information other than official.[3] At the same time, an adverse effect of this process is reported – the more children navigate online to use the benefits, the more often they face, by accident or intentionally, various risks.[4]

Although many of the risks encountered in cyberspace also exist in the "physical world," the interactive nature of the Internet - especially when the children often understand more about the Internet than their parents, teachers, librarians, and other care givers - makes it harder to protect our children online. In

addition, many common sense measures used in the "physical world," are not applicable in the cyberworld. A pedophile could not enter a schoolyard disguised as a child, but can easily pretend to be a child in an online chat room. A child who could not browse through Hustler in a convenience store can view sexually-explicit images online, legal or illegal. For the Internet to develop its full potential, these risks must be realistically addressed. Children may not understand these online risks, and parents may not be familiar enough with current technological and other solutions to these concerns.[5] Children are "prisoners" of their interest to new discoveries, to new challenges. Especially of the possibilities that the virtual space offers them, with unlimited communication. Most often they are liable to confide in a stranger on the Internet. Additionally, they are more vulnerable than adults to an adult sexual abuser, because their social practices are not sufficiently developed, something that does not allow them to identify certain signs that precede a risk, like a simulated praise or an inadequate remark that abusers most often use

[1] http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIReports/Final%20report.pdf. (accessed 01.11.2011).

[2] Risks and safety on the Internet. The perspective of European children. Full findings and policy implications from EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents in 25 countries. 2011, p.11. http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIReports/D4FullFindings.pdf, accessed 09.11.2011.

[3] European Forum on Internet with Human face – Common Responsibility. Workshop Report 3 Ethical issues: Protection of children, Exploitation and Discrimination, reporter Anne Marie Faradji, Equality Division, Directorate General of Human Rights, Council of Europe, Warsaw, March 26-27, 2004.

[4] Livingstone, S. & Helsper, E. (2010) Balancing opportunities and risks in teenagers' use of the internet. New Media & Society, 12(2): P.309-329.

[5] Child Safety Online. Internet Online Summit: Focus on Children. Washington DC, Dec 1-3, 1997   http://www.prevent-abuse-now.com/summit.htm (accessed 01. 11. 2011).

during conversations. They eventually exploit the lack of life experience of the child and his/her need to feel important, flattered.[6]

A major concern for parents and specialists that work with children-users of the Internet are the following fields:

Pedophiles that groom children. There are recurring press reports of pedophiles using chat rooms to lure children into physical meetings. According to a recent national newspaper report, chat rooms are the most popular activity for children online, yet most chat rooms are unsupervised. Through use of chat rooms, adult strangers can have direct one-to-one access to our children. The "safe" home setting, combined with our children's natural trust, may lead them to forget that these people are strangers. This makes it easier for the pedophile to prey on children who would never talk to a stranger in the "real world".[7] Development of information technologies and the evolution of the Internet create new possibilities of sexual exploitation of children for porn-lovers facilitating also the development of child pornography distribution

networks. In the present conditions, materials containing child pornography are produced and distributed by means of information technologies and the Internet network with a stunning speed and through immense virtual spaces. Child pornography image possessors use the Internet to exchange files, to access news exchange groups, to have access and communicate in "peer to peer" systems. They also use other technologies, of the newest and high-performance ones, that allow and facilitate exchange and sale of child pornography. Recently, child sex tourists/ sexual abusers/exploiters appeal to mobile telephony and communicate actively in chats/social networks, other communication spaces via the Internet for the purpose of meeting and recruiting children, and their further exploitation, something that represents a particularly high risk for children who are permanent users of information technologies.

Accessing pornographic materials by children. Pornography which is legally restricted to adults in the physical world can easily be

accessed by children on the Internet. Children can be exposed to this content intentionally or unintentionally and can also receive unsolicited links to adult sites.[8]

Offline meetings with persons they know only online. This action carries risks that can result in serious troubles. For young children, it may be appropriate to curtail the activity itself to prevent such meetings [offline meeting with someone they first met online]... it may be judged that young children lack the protective factors needed to keep them relatively safe (e.g. social judgments, self-protective skills).[9]

Cyberbullying. Bullying takes a number of different forms: physical, verbal, or psychological. It can also have a variety of different effects, including low self-esteem and physical or emotional pain. Victims can also become withdrawn, develop a fear of

going to school, or have increased difficulty with their assignments. In some cases, it may even lead to suicide.[10]

In 2010, in 25 European countries, with the financial support of the European Commission "Safer Internet" Programme, a research was undertaken in a sample of 25,142 children aged between 9-16 years using the Internet entitled *Risks and Safety on the Internet. The perspective of European children*. Published in a special report, the results of the research, allowed identifying, along with the Internet's benefits, some risky effects of children's online navigation. Thus, 23% of children visualised online images with sexual or pornographic content, 6% of children became victims of bullying and 9% met offline with persons they knew from online.[11] The problem of children's safety online is largely discussed in European countries, including Romania. The fact that the Internet can pose real danger for children is also demonstrated by a recent study conducted by the Romanian police, according

[6] „Internetul şi reţelele de socializare: între realizări şi pericole" [The Internet and social networks: in between progress and dangers]. An interview with A. Revenco, President of the International Centre for the Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights "La Strada". Timpul [The Time], No. 53 of 24.03.2011, p. 6.

[7] Child Safety Online. Internet Online Summit: Focus on Children. Washington DC, Dec 1-3, 1997 http://www.prevent-abuse-now.com/summit.htm (accessed 01.11.2011).

[8] Ibidem

[9] Risks and safety on the Internet. The perspective of European children. Full findings and policy implications from EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents in 25 countries. 2011, p.13.
http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIReports/D4FullFindings.pdf, accessed 09.11.2011.

[10] Cyberbullying a growing concern. Lader Online, By Joel van der Veen, Dec. 13, 2010. http://leaderonline.ca/Features/2010/December/Dec13/cyber-bullying.html, accessed 01.11.2011.

[11] Risks and safety on the Internet. The perspective of European children. Full findings and policy implications from EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents in 25 countries. 2011, p.6. http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIReports/D4FullFindings.pdf, accessed 09.11.2011.

to which around 60% of minors that use the Internet were contacted by paedophiles. Not less serious is also the fact that ¼ of children received message with explicitly sexual content. Those who received such messages are children that access social networking sites. Over 86% of Romanian schoolchildren recognised having at least one account at such sites. Besides, 80% of them recognise that they misrepresent their age saying they are not younger than 18. Personal data or all kinds of photographs are real treasures for paedophiles. On the Internet there exist more than one million pornographic materials with children, and 200 new material of this kind are uploaded each day. A study conducted by the Institute of Prevention and Psychosociology of the Romanian Police shows that girls are most exposed to risks. Many of them recognised having offered their real identity, photographs or even data about their family. On the other hand, many boys admit having met persons known from the Internet that they did not know much about.[12]

Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (adopted on Oct 25, 2007 at Lanzarote) is the most recent and advanced international treaty, as well as the first European treaty, that contains provisions not only for criminalisation of traditional forms of sexual abuse (child pornography, child prostitution, forced participation of children in pornographic performances). For the first time, the Convention regulates such an act as grooming, which is being false to children's trust for sexual purposes, something that is usually done online, and rules intended to prevent "child sex-tourism". In the process of preparation for signature and ratification of this Convention, the Republic of Moldova would need to take a number of steps to prevent and criminalise acts related to sexual exploitation of children, including those that involve using information technologies.

In this context, the present study sets a goal of presenting the specifics of Internet usage among children and their behaviour in the virtual space, identifying, particularly, the online risks that they face. At the same time, the study brings forward to the attention of organisations and involved actors a set of recommendations related to the improvement of the situation in the field of navigation online and prevention of risks through implementation of necessary measures aimed at ensuring safe usage of the Internet by children from the Republic of Moldova.

II. The goals and methodology of the study

---

[12] „Peste 60% dintre copiii care folosesc Internetul au fost contactați de pedofili" [Over 60% of children that use the Internet were contacted by pedophiles]. Information portal „Realitatea TV" of 09.02.2011.

II. The goals and methodology of the study

The aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to perform an analysis of practices of Internet use by children from the Republic of Moldova, especially of their online behaviour for the purpose of identifying risks for their safety and health.

In order to realise the proposed aim, a number of objectives were set forward that are related to establishing the nature of risks (at the level of content, contacts and behaviour) that children face online.

Objectives:
- Analysis of the role of the Internet in children's life;
- Identification of ways of accessing the Internet by children;
- Identification of the hours and length of accessing the Internet by children;
- Highlighting the main goals of using the Internet by children;
- Identification and analysis of potentially risky children's behaviour online:
  - accessing pornographic material;
  - looking for new acquaintances online;
  - meetings offline with persons known online;
  - exchange of personal data, personal photographs and videos;
  - cyberbullying;
- Evaluation of the process of monitoring accessing the Internet by children from the part of parents and teachers and assessment of their role in reducing the risks the children can face online.

The methodology of the study

The following methods were used to analyse the practices and behaviour of children online:
Interviewing on the basis of a questionnaire conducted in a sample of 1,347 children aged between 12-16, users of the Internet from 59 localities of the Republic of Moldova (except Transnistria), in the period of April 18 – May 21, 2011 (see Table 1). This is a probabilistic, multistage and representative sampling of the 12-16 years age category. There is a 2.66% error margin for 95% credibility. Localities were selected depending on their size and location (except for Chisinau municipality, Balti and Comrat), for each statistical zone apart.

In order to formulate the questions for the children's questionnaire, consultations were made with psychologists, psychology teachers and sociologists who have vast experience of working with children, so that the questions would not only exclude causing harm to the mental state of the interviewees, but also be understandable/correspond to the age of the children. At the pilot stage, the questionnaire

was adjusted and modified in a way to not generate questions in the process of filling it out and eliminate the need for the comments of field operators. The questionnaire (see Annex 1) contains 10 questions (fit in a sheet of paper), many of which are multiple choice questions. A process of self-administration was employed relevant for such research. Thus, each child got a questionnaire to be completed in 5-7 minutes. When the groups contained many persons aged 12-16 y.o., the date-of-birth procedure was applied where only those were selected who had the closest date of birth to the date of the research. Statistical analysis of data was performed with the help of the *SPSS Statistics 17.0*.

Table 1. Distribution of interviewed children by statistical zones and children's residence area

Statistical zones
Chisinau municipality - the city of Chisinau and its suburbs constituents of the municipality
North - the regions of Briceni, Edinet, Ocnita, Donduseni, Soroca, Drochia, Rascani, Glodeni, Falesti, Sangerei, Floresti, Soldanesti and the Balti municipality
Centre - the regions of Ungheni, Telenesti, Rezina, Orhei, Calarasi, Nisporeni, Straseni, Criuleni, Dubasari, Anenii Noi, Ialoveni and Hancesti
South - the regions of Leova, Cimislia, Basarabeasca, Causeni, Stefan Voda, Cantemir, Taraclia and Cahul, and ATU Gagauzia
TOTAL: 1.347 children

The interviewing of children was a part of awareness-raising activities for adolescents organised in cooperation with the Ministry of Education of the Republic Moldova in the period mentioned above. The interviewing was conducted immediately before awareness-raising seminars and focus-groups. So the main aim of awareness-raising seminars was raising the awareness and information of children through interactive activities about the risks related to navigation online and ways to develop safe behaviour in the web space. At the end of information activities, children were distributed information materials containing recommendations on safety online and the Hot Line number where children can call in case of necessity, while school teachers and youth center educators were offered thematic materials (brochures, posters etc.).

Interviews with specialists. 20 specialists from 20 localities were interviewed, among them – teachers of computer sciences from lyceums and programme educators/coordinators from youth centers where children access the Internet. Although initially, interviewing of specialists both from urban and rural localities was presumed, the process of interviewing proved that the information offered by specialists from the rural areas was less relevant and content-poor, the reason why further on, only those from urban areas were interviewed. Interviewing of specialists was organised in the period of May 22 – June 17, 2011. Individual discussions with specialists were focused on the following subject areas: use of the Internet, dangerous navigation situations reported by children, monitoring and facilitation of safe access to the Internet by children and the relevant role of teachers/parents.

Focus-groups. Focus groups with children were conducted along with the quantitative study in 8 localities, in 4 cities (including the Chisinau, Balti and Comrat municipalities) and four villages selected randomly from the 4 statistical zones for each statistical zone to be represented by a rural and an urban locality. In total, 8 focus-groups were conducted involving 103 children-users of the Internet in the age of 12-16 years. The topics discussed with children in the focus-groups were related to situation of risky behaviour on the net and aspects of monitoring of online activity by parents.

Analysis of documents. Reports of more than 50 awareness-raising seminars for children were analysed (users and non-users of the Internet). These seminars conducted at educational institutions and summer camps (April – July 2011) with the subject of "Children's Safety Online" and organised by a team of volunteers of the International Centre "La Strada". Recent publications in the field of children's safety online were also analysed, as well as articles, information published in mass media in the Republic of Moldova in the first ten months of 2011.

Limitations. The study involved children aged between 12-16 years, with more or less vast experience of using the Internet. Because the interviewing of children was conducted before the awareness-raising activities related to online safety, the study covered only those children that were present on that day in classes at the pre-university educational institution.

Children were encouraged to give honest answers. Thus, assuming the fact that any research takes place in a social context – in an educational institution in this case – it is not excluded that some children provided "socially desirable" answers. To minimise this influence, children were informed that the anonymity condition was going to be observed and about the importance of providing honest information.

The information obtained from teachers of computer sciences mostly referred to the situation from urban regions and less to rural regions. Though teachers have a rich professional experience in this field, it is still subjective, something that has to be taken into account.

III. Results of the study

III. Results of the study

1. Practices related to accessing the Internet and online activities

The role of the Internet in children's life

Today, almost in every family in Moldova, a personal computer becomes something equally important as a TV or refrigerator. At the same time, development of information technologies favours mass expansion of the Internet, even in the most remote localities.

Analysis of reports from the awareness-raising seminars for children, organised at the national level, as well as data obtained from focus-groups show that most children from urban areas and more than half of children from rural areas are active users of the Internet. These estimates are close to the estimates of teachers of computer sciences from lyceums, according to which around 80% of children from urban localities and approximately 70% from rural localities have access to the Internet.

> *"Taking into account the rural and urban space, an average of 75% of children (at least those that attended the online safety awareness-raising seminars) have access to the Internet".*
> *(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-5])*
>
> *"Compared to the period time 2-3 years ago, the Internet became much more accessible, particularly from the financial point of view, respectively parents can afford paying for this service for their children".*
> *(Teacher of computer sciences [PI-16-South])*

Talking about the role of the Internet in the life of children from the Republic of Moldova, we should not underestimate its importance. Children's evidence show that the virtual space has completely entwined in the life of the younger generation of Moldova. Children-participants at focus-groups reported that the Internet has become something natural in their life. In children's opinion, having access to the Internet today is not only something fashionable, but a vital need for each and every young person in Moldova. According to them, those times are left behind when you had to go to a library for new knowledge; they prefer using the Internet for this purpose now. School-age users of the Internet stated having a feeling and being considered "up-to-date". Children from rural localities are especially glad to have this possibility, where the Internet is often the only possibility to access information sources.

"The Internet is a part of me, an integral part of my life. I cannot imagine how I can live without the Internet"
(Girl, 15 years old, [FG-2])

"For us, those from villages, the Internet is like an additional door that helps you learn many new things, learn what happens in the world… When the Internet is down, I feel disconnected from the world… feel like I am back in the Middle Ages"
(Boy, 16 years old, [FG-4])

"When I go to sleep, I tell my friends on "Odnoklassniki" "good night", and when I get up in the morning, hurrying to school, I will always have a look if someone visited my profile during the night and what is written there…"
(Girl, 14 years old, [FG-8])

For many migrant parents, buying a computer and connecting to the Internet is a cheap way to communicate with children left back in Moldova. However, considering the fact that parents are not beside their children and cannot monitor their behaviour online, the children are left almost alone online, making themselves the most vulnerable of children-users of the Internet.

"Very many parents of children from our lyceum are gone abroad. Parents buy a computer to communicate more freely on skype with them, but most of the time they are left online unsupervised".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-10-Center])

Therefore, the Internet is largely used by children from the Republic of Moldova, regardless of their residence environment, age and sex.

Access Hours

Most of the interviewed children (84.2%) normally access the Internet in the time interval between 14:00 - 22:00, i.e. in spare time that does not coin-cide with the study hours. Almost each one in 10 children that participated in the study (9.8%) access the Internet at night, in other words in the time interval of 22:00 - 08:00 (see Fig. 1). According to specialists, this is a category of children whose parents are gone abroad, so the children plan their spare time with no restrictions or control from adults.

Fig. 1. "Usually in what unterval of time do you access the Internet?"
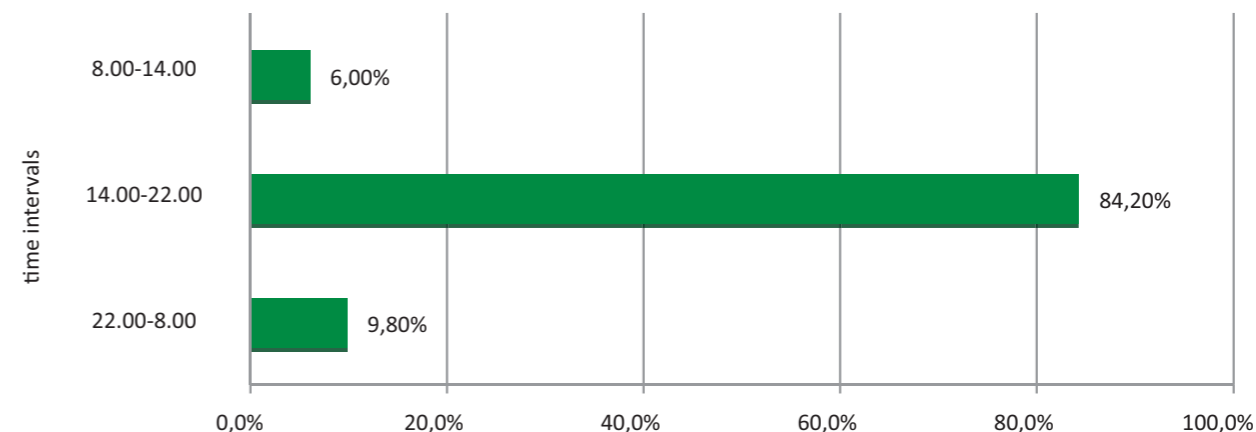
Specialists beat the alarm because of children that stay online hours straight at night. According to them, this injures the health of the child and effects academic performance.

"For example, I also have access to communication sites and very many pupils are registered there as friends. In the morning, when I look into the list of visitors of my site, I see my students "having visited" me at 12 at night, and at 3 and 4 in the morning. Anyway, I don't think that this child that stayed online all night has a good rest, the way it is required for his age. And on the next day at school he does not study the way he should, not in a normal way."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-11-North])

"Why do I use the Internet at night? Well… after I come from school, I do some work around the house, then I do my homework, then I grow tired… I sleep a little and can wake up at 12 at night, and then I stay a couple of hours in the Internet"
(Boy, 15 years old, [FG-6])

After the questioning, the study showed that some children reported accessing the Internet between 08:00 - 14:00 (6%), which coincided with the time of studies. As mentioned earlier, there is a high probability that these children access the Internet through their mobile phones, which is possible also at the time of school.

"Some children, when asked about the time when they access the Internet, indicated that they use their mobile with non-stop access to the Internet, which is with them even at school – they say that access the Internet during breaks or even during classes."
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

So the Internet and computer have mostly substituted such activities as reading. Therefore, teachers and parents should consolidate their efforts to stimulate children to read literature, go to libraries etc. On the other hand, it is necessary to apply stricter rules to forbid usage of mobile phones during classes at educational institutions, something that will make students focus more effectively on the subject matter.

Ways of access
3/4 of the children that attended the awareness-raising seminars on online safety reported that they access the Internet at home, the rest – at friends' and at school. And only a small number mentioned visiting Internet-cafes for this purpose. Also, most children that participated in focus-groups stated that they ac-

cess the Internet at home. A major share of children-users of the Internet that access the Web from home compared to those who access it from public places (Internet-cafes, school, library), probably, accounts for the growth in the number of personal computers in our country in recent years. Another explanation of the preference of accessing the Internet from home can come from the fact that the time spend in the Internet-cafes is more expensive, while using the Internet at school is monitored by teachers. Besides that, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, during the last 5 years, the number of subscribers of mobile telephone networks grows on average by 450 thousand persons annually,[13] with mobile telephones with access to the Internet become more and more popular among with young people, including in the rural area.

"Approximately 40% of children-users of the Internet from rural regions access the Internet through the fixed telephony network (via modem), while a great number of children access the virtual space through mobile telephony (mobile telephones with access to the Internet). Since the Internet is a convenient way of communication between parents gone abroad and their children, this way becomes very popular in rural regions, which are the major source of migrant outflow".
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

---

[13] www.statistica.md/public/files/publicatii_electronice/Moldova_in_cifre/2011/Moldova_in_cifre_2011_rom_rus.pdf accessed 01.11.2011

The fact that many children have access to the Internet at home does not automatically mean that they are safe. Children stated that more rarely the computer is placed in a room for all members of the family; often the computer with Internet access is placed in their room, which is a private space also during the night. This fact prevents parents from observing their activity online.

"I believe that the computer should be installed in the family's home at a common place, for example, in the sitting-room and not in the children's room, from where they could access the internet also at night. In such a way parents could easier observe alarming situations of children's navigation in the Internet."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-10-Center])

For the purpose of facilitating the monitoring of children's behaviour online, the interviewed specialists recommend placing the computer with access to the Internet in a common room for the whole family.

Length of access
According to teachers of computer sciences, children use their personal computers mostly to access the

Internet. When asked about the time usually spent on the Internet from the moment of access, most mentioned 3-4 hours (38.5%), 1-2 hours (31.7%) or 5-6 hours (15.4%). 8.4% of the interviewed children spend less than one hour by the computer, including 6% who spend 7-8 hours and more (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. "When you access the internet how many hours do you usually spend there without a break?"

less than an hour	8,4%
1-2 hours	31,7%
3-4 hours	38,5%
5-6 hours	15,4%
7-8 hours and more	6,0%
did not answer	0,1%
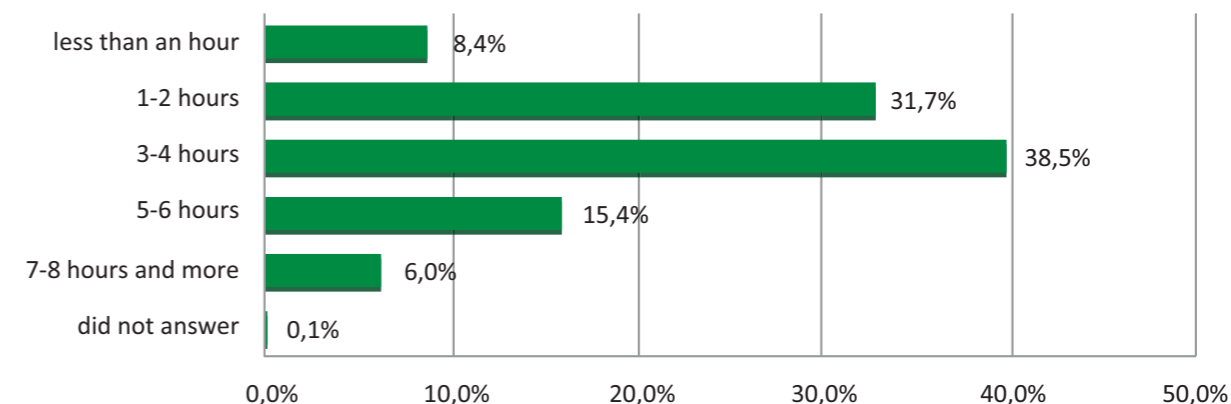
It should be mentioned that 2/3 of the children that have reported navigating the Internet for 7-8 hours straight and in the 22:00 - 8:00 time interval are boys, most (3/4) being from rural localities. 12-year old children spend in the Internet 3-4 hours (42.1%), 13-year olds – 1-2 hours straight (41%), and 14-16-year olds mostly stay in the Internet for 3-4 hours (40% on average). The highest rate of accessing the Internet – 7-8 hours and more, compared to other age categories, is registered among 13-year olds.

"During class hours with pupils of the 10th year of study, we talked about the passions of young people and addressed the issue of time spent by them on the Internet during the day. There are children who stay 1, 2, 3 hours, but there are children, who, from the moment they come back home from school until they go to sleep, spend their time at the computer... And when they have spare time, on Saturday, on Sunday they continuously stay on the net".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-3-North])

"Ideally, parents should allow children to access the Internet for 2, maximum 3 hours per day. Parents should not allow them stay up late online".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-10-Center])

"The Internet is like a disease – once you enter, it can hold you hours straight, especially children who know no limits. Children often forget about their homework. I heard from children that they do their homework communicating at the same time in the "Odnoklassniki" network or with friends on Skype. Respectively, they are not focused on the homework that they have to do, the effect being zero".
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-4])

Most of the interviewed professionals when asked about how many hours straight an adolescent can stay by a computer without harming his health, indicated 1-2 hours per day. Professionals have also mentioned that even when children access the Web for 1-2 hours per day, their behaviour online should be monitored by their parents.

"Among the alarming signs that should put on alert a parent of a child actively using the Internet, even a teacher of computer sciences, should be the number of hours spent by the child in front of a computer and his state of mind – whether the child becomes withheld or too nervous, aggressive. Unfortunately, many parents blame the critical age of adolescence".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-3-North])

According to some psychological studies, adolescents that spend too much time on social networks like the Facebook or Twitter tend to develop behavioural problems and narcissist tendencies (from "The Telegraph"). Studies conducted by Larry D. Rosen, a professor of psychology at the California State University, include analysis of the impact that social networks have on the behaviour and personal development in the case of adolescents. According to a study, excessive use of social networks can modify the mental state of adolescents, cultivating superficiality, aggressiveness and anti-social behaviour. Children and adolescents that use the Facebook or similar sites and have continuous access facilities tend to over-use them being predisposed to anxiety, depression and other types of mental disorders. Their academic performance is also affected. According to a study, adolescents who checked their accounts on social networks at least once in a time interval of 15 minutes had poorer results at school.

Social networks also have positive psychological effects on adolescents, when the social platform helps more timid persons to overcome their fears of public speaking and encourages interaction, increasing the adolescents' ability to experience empathy to other persons.[14]

Specialists recommend parents to avoid forbidding the access to information technologies or application of other repressive measures to their children, rather it makes sense to create other alternatives of spending their spare time.

Children's aims in accessing the Internet

Analysis of the aims of using the Internet over the last three months preceding the questioning implied differentiation into 11 categories of aims indicated by questionnaire respondents. According to various answers obtained during the questioning of children, the most frequently indicated aims of accessing the Internet were *visiting the personal profile on* *social networks* (89.5% of all answers), *looking for information to do the homework* (88.5%), *sending/receiving real-time messages* (77.4%) and *watching video clips/downloading films* (75.9%). Apart from that, almost a half of the children indicated having used a web-camera for the purpose of using the Internet, and around 44% of the interviewed children admitted that the Internet is a "means of entertainment" for them, where they use it to play games online. Among other specified aims, there is also *reading/browsing news on the Internet* (42.4%), *sending/receiving e-mail messages* (36.2%), *telephone conversations* (34.6%), *communication via blogs* (11.7%) or *chats* (11.1%) (see Fig. 3).

[14] „Excesul de Facebook la adolescenţi cultivă narcisismul şi comportamente anti-sociale" [Excess of Facebook for Adolescents Cultivates Narcissism and Anti-social Behaviour]. Source: Antena3.ro as of 11.08.2011. Accessed 12.08.2011.

Fig. 3. "For what purpose did you use the Internet during the last three months?" (data referred to the number of answers provided by the interviewed adolescents)

Purpose	Percentage
visiting the personal profile on one of social networks	89,5%
looking for the information to do the homework	88,8%
sending/receiving real-time messages	77,4%
watching video clips/downloading films	75,9%
using a web-camera	47,7%
online games	43,6%
reading/watching news on the Internet	42,4%
sending/receiving e-mail messages	36,2%
telephone conversations	34,6%
communications via blogs	11,7%
visiting chat-rooms	11,1%
other	1,2%

Segregated analysis by certain variables emphasises the fact that some activities on the net are mainly characteristic for a certain category of children. Thus, doing one's homework using the Internet is more characteristics for girls (53.3%) and 15year old children (22%) from the rural area (58.4%), the latter being explained in the conditions where the rural localities to not have an up-to-date book stock. Online games are specific especially for children at the age of 13 (22%), boys (66.1%) and those from the rural area (62.2%). Watching or downloading films is one of the aims especially for children aged between 15-16 (around 22%), boys (51%) and children from the rural area (58.3%)). Communication on various social networks is specific for girls (52.8%), children in the age of 15-16 years (approximately 22%) and those from the rural area (58.9%). While sending real-time messages is more characteristic for girls (51.8%), then sending/receiving e-mails is a more common practice for boys (53.2%). Using a web-camera is more commonly practiced by boys (53.6%) and adolescents aged 16 (23.8%), as well as by children from the rural area (62.7%). 642 children of all the study participants (47.7%) indicated using a web-camera, including 574 (89.4% of the number of web-camera users) that communicate with relatives abroad, regardless of the type of channel and mostly (49.9%) in real-time.

According to the interviewed specialists, the children's goals in accessing the Internet are basically communication through social networking sites and games online. According to teachers, for too little time do children access the Internet exactly for the purpose of finding information to prepare their homework; they think that accessing the Internet for this purpose is rather an excuse to tell parents in order to hide other intentions.

According to teachers, one of the reasons that prevent using the Internet as an information tool could be the language barrier – most of the information is in English and in Russian, which not all children possess.

"Why, don't you know what adolescents are looking for in the Internet? In most of the cases they stay on Odnoklassniki.com, for hours... Children seem to have become addicted to this site and we hear about this problem from teachers and parents... I have noticed that of all the children-users of the Internet, only 10% use the Internet for learning purposes, although for most of them this is an argument for parents to pay for Internet access... Actually, most children use the Internet for games and don't know what else for – for music, films, online messaging etc."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-2-North])

"My opinion is that they stay too much in the Internet and don't take the information needed to do their homework, they rather chat with each other instead of looking for information for educational purposes. Of course we have very poor sites in Romanian, very much information is there in Russian, English. For example, at our school we study French, we only have a couple of English classes, children find it very difficult for them, they cannot access information posted on the Web because all of it is in English and very little at all in Romanian".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-4-North])

"Pupils that I know mostly play online; a game has some excitement, a chase and children spend too much time on the Internet playing games".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-9-Center])

"You know, children use the Internet basically for the purpose of accessing online games. A very insignificant share of children use the Internet to find information for their homework, this is the last thing they do"
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-6-North])

It should be clarified that some specialists that were interviewed mentioned a good practice when children are recommended to access certain sites for educational purposes. Children can also access sites created exactly for the purpose of promotion of children safety online. Unfortunately, they currently exist only in other countries.

"The advantage of using the Internet is accessing information for educational purposes that children can find on the Internet. There are also online language training courses. At our Centers we have a list of sites that stays in front of the children that access the Internet, sites that we recommend them. Among them there is a Romanian site sigur.info that promotes children's safety online. Sometimes I show this video to children, so that understand that there, at the other computer that they communicate with, there can be a person that is totally different from the one that they were introduced to."
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-4])

Analysis of reports from awareness-raising seminars on children's safety online shows that social networking sites constitute the most attractive form of spending time for all children, regardless of their age and residence environment.   From talks with children, particularly in focus-groups organised in different urban and rural centres, it has been identified that top popular sites include www.odnoklassniki.ru.   Analysis of the preferences of children from urban and rural regions demonstrates that in the rural environment, children are mainly fans of www.odnoklassniki.ru and www.facebook.com, while those from the urban environment have profiles at the following social networking sites: www.formspring.com, www.vkontakte.ru, www.facebook.com. It should be noted that those from the urban environment more often use instant messengers like ICQ, Twitter.com and access a number of chats for the purpose of communication online. According to children, social networking sites are often used by colleagues from school to comment on what happened today at school, to gossip about a colleague etc. At the same time, it is known that social networking sites are also used by paedophiles to facilitate contacts with children – potential victims of sexual exploitation.

MOLDOVA, A PAEDOPHILE'S PARADISE [15]
Here are the "gold-fields" of perverts: odnoklassniki.ru and mail.ru

On some of the most popular social networking sites in the countries of the former USSR space, www.odnoklassniki.ru and www.mail.ru, boys from the Republic of Moldova in the range of ages between 11 and 17 years have in their friends' lists men aged 30-55 years from Germany, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Russia, even Thailand, wanted by the Chisinau police for child trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, child pornography or sex-tourism.

On some pictures posted on the site, children appear in the company of these men in private places drinking alcohol.

These friends are not coincidental. A well-organised network of foreign paedophiles operated freely on the territory of the Republic of Moldova up until November 2010, when the Chisinau police managed to make some arrests. One of the main suspects whose case reached the desk of the judge was Oleg Sivitki – a citizen of the Russian Federation and Norway. He is suspected by the police to be the head and administrator of a site that promoted sex-tourism in Moldova for the purpose of sexual exploitation of children: www.gaymoldova.livejournal.com. The site was operational until early April 2011. We have obviously reached the situation when child sexual services are promoted through the Internet.

(Ziarul Adevărul [The Truth Newspaper] online, edition Aug 24, 2011)

---

[15] MOLDOVA, RAIUL PEDOFILILOR [Moldova, A Paedophiles' Paradise] (Authors: Olga Ceaglei, Andrei Aştefănesei). Ziarul Adevărul [The Truth Newspaper] online, edition Aug 24, 2011 http://www.adevarul.ro/moldova/social/MOLDOVA-RAIUL_PEDOFILILOR_Iata_care_sunt_-minele_de_aur-_ale_perversilor-_odnoklassniki-ru_si_mail-ru_0_541746540.html. Accessed 25.08.2011.

Nevertheless, social networking sites seem to be in the top of the Internet channels used by children in their communication with various categories of persons. Children prefer exactly these social networks to communicate with persons from other countries whom they found through the Internet and with whom they communicate only through the Internet – approximately 40% indicated this communication tool as the most preferential (see Fig. 4). Social networking sites are also used by approximately 38% of children that communicate with persons that they came to know online, as recommended by reliable persons – family, relatives (see Fig. 5). At the same time,

Fig.4. "Through which Internet channels do you communicate with persons from other countries whom you came to know through the Internet and with whom you communicate only through the Internet?"
(data referred to the number of respondents)

Channel	Value
social networking sites	39,6%
real-time messaging	31,9%
e-mail	8,0%
chat-room	4,5%
other channels of the virtual space	2,8%
this situation is not specific for me	13,2%
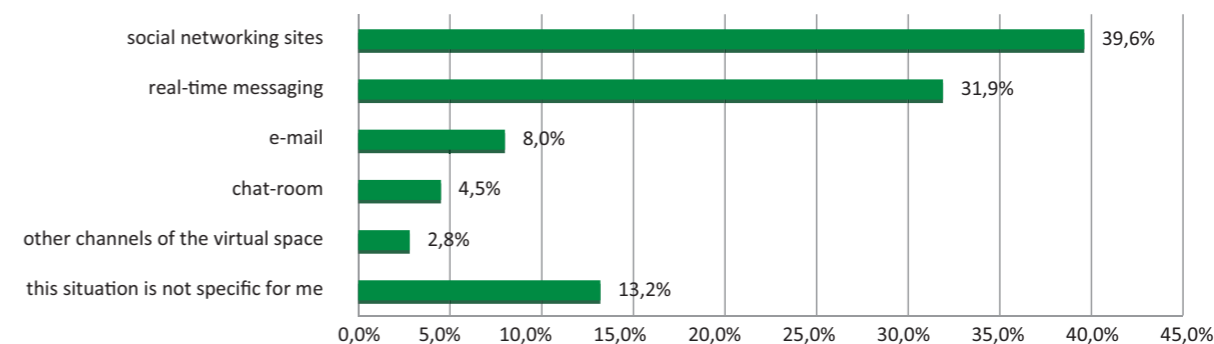
Fig.5. "Through which Internet channels do you communicate with persons that you came to know through Internet recommended by reliable persons (family, relatives) whom you know in reality?"
(data referred to the number of respondents)

Channel	Value
social networking sites	37,8%
real-time messaging	29,7%
e-mail	7,1%
chat-room	1,3%
other chanels of the virtual space	1,4%
this situation is not specific for me	22,7%
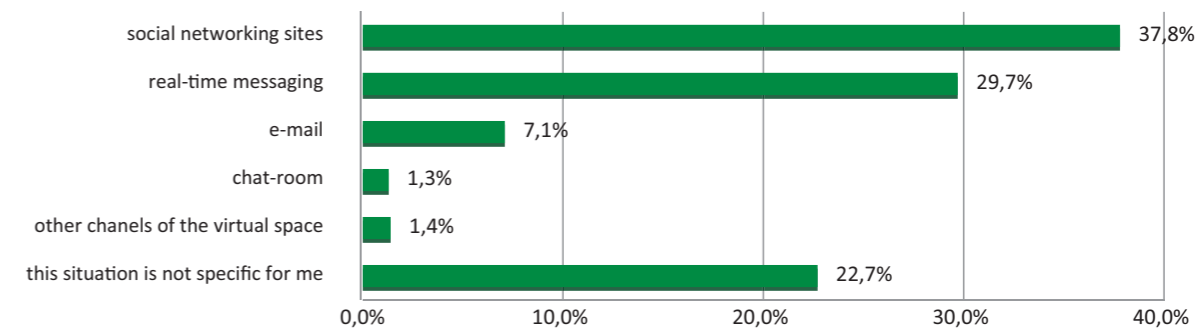
this communication channel is used by approximately 42% of children who communicate with persons known from real life before they start communicating with them through the Internet (see Fig. 6). Coincidently, only about 32% of the interviewed children use social networking sites in their communication with relatives abroad, while a big share of them, approximately 45%, use real-time messaging for this purpose (see Fig. 7).

Fig.6. "Through which Internet channels do you communicate with persons whom you knew in reality before communicating with them through the Internet?"
(data referred to the number of respondents)

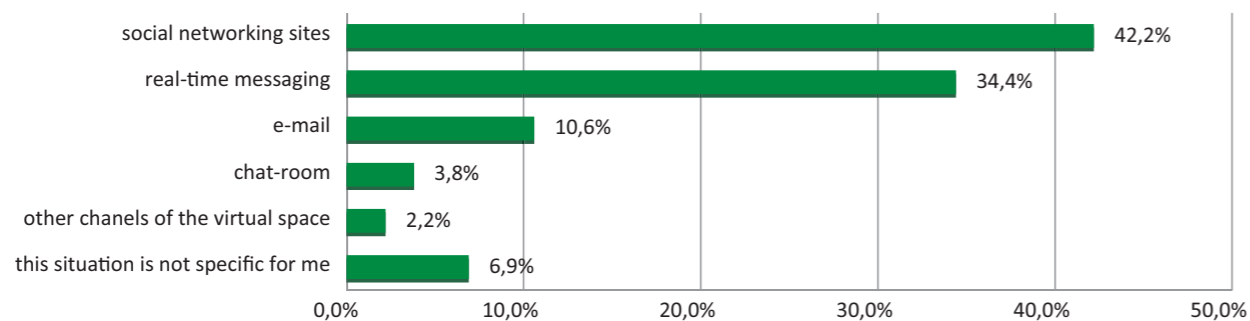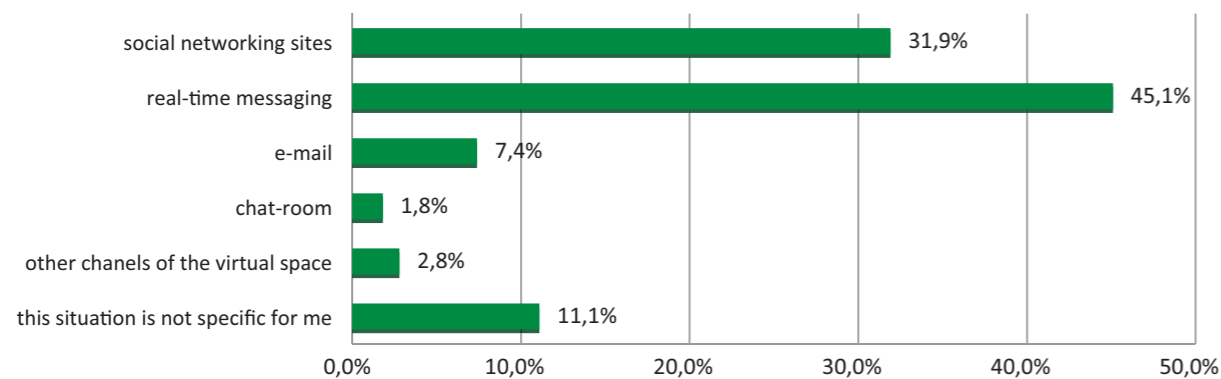**Fig.7.** "Through which Internet channels do you communicate with relatives who are abroad?"
(data referred to the number of respondents)

Indeed, when geographical distances prevent direct communication with relatives, friends or acquaintances, the Internet can serve a cheap and convenient tool. At the same time, specialists beat the alarm about the fact that often children-users of the Internet prefer to communicate with surrounding persons online rather than directly face-to-face. Thus, in the framework of discussions in focus-groups, around 2/3 of children claimed that it easier for them to communicate with their peers online than offline. This information is confirmed also by reports from safety online awareness-raising seminars for children. According to the interviewed specialists, children prefer to communicate online with colleagues whom they meet each day or with friends who are physically situated a couple of meters or hundreds of meters from them. Some children stated that they prefer communicating online because it has no barriers.

"Communication online is more convenient for them than offline communication, they feel easier when they communicate in the Internet... I do not think that it is more convenient, but I believe that it is a disease, a habit, a problem of the age... Well, maybe it is more about those who are more screwed-up in communicating face-to-face, sometimes they cannot say what they want to say, but in front of a computer he seems more at ease".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-7-C])

"Through the Internet or social sites, children express their thoughts and emotions easier compared to the face-to-face situations. Recently, we watched a TV programme in Russian where teachers beat the alarm about the fact that children find more and more difficult to express their thoughts... I think that this trend exists in our country, too".
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-5])

"Girls seem to feel more at ease when communicating online with boys compared to situations in real life, when they are shy. Breaking these barriers allows me to establish closer relations with a girl online and I like this".
(Boy, 16 years old, [FG-6])

Some of the interviewed specialists stated that it is fashionable for children to use the vocabulary that is often used online and they are worried about the fact that pupils-users of new technologies already forget the spelling of their mother tongue.

"Spending much time in the Internet, children forget/limit themselves in the opportunity of reading a book. Sometimes, I even hear them speaking a codified language used online: "C.f.?" meaning "Ce faci?" [What are you doing?]; "f.b." – "foarte bine" [very nice]... They also forget the grammar of their mother tongue, in sentences and thoughts that they formulate, there is no clarity and spelling is no longer important, they just do not pay attention to these things".
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-4])

The present study showed that almost a half of the interviewed children use the Internet for the purpose of accessing the web-camera. At the same time, more than a half (55.5%) of children that access a web-camera come from a rural region, and analysis of data based on gender show that 54% are boys and the rest are girls.

Approximately 40% of children that claimed accessing the Internet particularly for the purpose of using a web-camera spend 3-4 hours continuously in the Internet, while the number of users of web-camera seems to be increasing proportionally to age (Table 2).

Tabelul 2. The age of children that indicated using the Internet particularly for the purpose of accessing web-camera

Age	12 years	13 years	14 years	15 years	16 years	Total
Share	14,8 %	19,5 %	19,8 %	22,1 %	23,8 %	100 %

Most children access a web-camera in the 14:00 - 22:00 time interval. At the same time, data analysis reveals the fact that one in ten children (10.1%) use a web-camera in the 22:00 - 08:00 time interval. It should be mentioned that the study involved identification of 18 children – web-cam users who at the same time reported staying in the Internet usually between 22:00 and 08:00 and respectively 7-8 hours and more continuously.   Analysis of socio-demographic data from the questionnaires filled-out by these 18 children show that, most often, they are aged between 13 and 15 years, predominantly coming from the rural area

and 2/3 of them are boys. Obviously, the research methods did not allow (neither was it included as an objective of the study) collecting qualitative information on the goals of accessing web-cameras by children, respectively it is not known with whom and how they communicate through webcams at night. At the same time, some specialists express concern about the use of the Internet by children for the purpose of accessing a web-camera. In their opinion, this activity could represent a potential danger for the children.

"I would regard the very use of web-camera as a sign of alert for parents... It is for the parents to realise that there can appear some problems... that there can be various sexual or that sort of problems. Well, I have not encountered such cases, but I read on the Internet that there exists something like that, meaning people using sexual services online for a payment... This should put parents on the alert…"
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-5-North])

"I do not know situations when children communicate with strangers via web-camera, but it is very difficult to make children disclose something like this on their own. I think that there is a great risk that something unpleasant could happen in case of such a communication… I heard from some persons from the US that you can earn money via a web-cam… It is possible that some persons could look at a young person and make some unpleasant things (satisfy their sexual appetites). At first, for a child, this could be just curiosity, well, just to see what it is like etc., but for others this becomes like a drug because they permanently access a web-camera. And children are predisposed to take certain situations for a model, when somebody, for example, took his clothes off in front of a web-camera because such information is distributed among them…"
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-11-North])

Thus, the risk of sexual exploitation of children via a web-camera is not excluded.

In recent years, in the Republic of Moldova, a new type of services for young people in Moldova is contemplated – **erotic video-chat**.[16]   This implies partial or total stripping of the model in live web-chat conditions (a kind of direct TV broadcast, only on the Internet). Agencies providing such services recruit girls via announcements and promise quite big payment in exchange for "contemplation" of their beauty. According to Veaceslav Soltan, Head of the Information Technologies Department of the General Prosecutor's Office, the webcam model activity is considered illegal and admits that some modelling agencies recruit girls for the purpose of their trafficking abroad. Another danger of this

"business" is related to the difficulty of giving up this "activity". Often, when girls want to give up a certain activity they risk to be blackmailed with their strip films and forced to continue their work.[17]

Thus, the growth of the rate of penetration of the Internet in the rural environment and the increase in the number of Internet connections currently allows children to fill in their spare time with various options available in the virtual space. At the same time, a risk of online communication is replacement of real meetings with virtual ones, something that leads to geographical isolation of a person. According to specialists, excessive communication through social networking sites generates among children the syndrome of "sedentary lifestyle" and inactivity.

[16] „Excesul de Facebook la adolescenți cultivă narcisismul și comportamente anti-sociale" [Excess of Facebook for Adolescents Cultivates Narcissism and Anti-social Behaviour]. Source: Antena3.ro din 11.08.2011. Accessed 12.08.2011.

[17] "Prostitution in disguise: erotic video-chat". Timpul [The Time], No. 23 as of 08.02.2011, p. 6.

Monitoring of online activity by parents and teachers
It is known from children's and specialists' reports that parents have a possibility to monitor children's activity online only when they are home, in other words after they return from work. Thus in most of the cases, children are left alone online in the period of time after school up until their parents come from work.

"My mother comes back home at seven in the evening, before that I stay in the Internet as much as I want, without any restriction or problem".
(Girl, 13 years old, [FG-1])

Children recognise that parents applied more restrictions on the time spent in front of a computer when they were 10-12 years old. In most cases, they are concerned that they do not stay up late and send children to bed, because next day they have to wake them up early in the morning to go to school. According to children-participants of focus-groups and reports on awareness-raising seminars, growing-up and having a separate room determines a decrease in restrictions applied by parents as to the time spent in the Internet.

At the same time, some of the children that reported being supervised by parents in their accessing the Internet indicated that they access the Internet at night when parents sleep. Some children from the rural region witnessed that parents somehow regret having facilitated their access to the Internet because they stay hours on the Web without allocating time to house-work or animal care. Parents of children-users of the Internet, especially from the rural area, rarely associate the Internet with some risks.

"In villages, the main reason why parents limit children's access to the Internet is because they do not manage to help them around the farm. In many cases, parents from villages do not even imagine what a virtual space means and what dangers it contains".
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

"Usually, most parents do not limit their children's access to the Internet. "It's good that he stays at home ... silent ...the main thing is that he did his homework". I think that this is a serious problem that parents do not recognise or ignore".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-North])

"Sometimes, parents think that their children are not "children" any more, meaning that they are big already and do not see any risks related to navigation online, do not apply any restrictions to adolescents related to accessing the Internet."
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

As mentioned above, in the case when parents are gone abroad, children are basically not monitored by adults in their online activity. Normally, they are charged to their grandparents or relatives who are not aware about risks that children are exposed online.

"To tell the truth, I am not sure that it is possible for parents to involve in the monitoring of child's behaviour online. First of all, in our country, frankly speaking, who should monitor them? For example, around, maybe not quite 50%, but about 45% of parents of pupils from our lyceum are gone abroad. Is it the grandmother who will monitor them? It is impossible".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-5-North])

"There are parents who supervise their children's online activity, but there are children who have unlimited access: many parents are gone abroad and children do what they want, stay on the Internet as much as they wish".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-1-North])

"For example, 8 of 22 children-pupils in our class have their parents gone abroad, the children are in charge of the grandmother, neighbours or they are alone... In fact, the decision to buy a computer was basically made by the parents for the purpose of communicating with children. Yes, children communicate with parents via skype, but ... this is maximum 20-30 minutes per day, if at all, because they work somewhere, they cannot just stay online all the time. The rest of the time, the children stay online alone".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-4-North])

Over the last five years, a doubling has been registered in the number of computers referred to the number of pupils from primary and secondary comprehensive educational institutions.[18] Most of the interviewed teachers of computer sciences reported that educational institutions where they work have access to the Internet. Almost all teachers specified that children's access to the Internet at school is monitored. Children are allowed to access the Web space on the condition of accessing only informational sources that are necessary to prepare their homework, not for other purposes.

Most of the interviewed teachers are agree with the idea of consolidation of teachers' and parents' efforts, so that, regardless of the place of access to the Internet, the child would use web resources only for his/her benefit, being permanently in safety.

[18] Educația în Republica Moldova [Education in the Republic of Moldova]. Statistical Publication. 2010/2011. The National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, Chisinau, 2011, p. 33. http://www.statistica.md/public/files/publicatii_electronice/Educatia/Educatia%20_RM_2011.pdf, accessed 03.11.2011.

"Even if teachers warn children about risks online, they anyway come home, where they need some kind of supervision from parents. And if parents were home, they would take care of them. But if he is left with a grandparent, he does not take care – he says it's good that he is home and I do not have worry where he is gone".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-2-North])

"...While access to the Internet is conditional – for educational purposes (not entertainment), then outside school, in family, these restrictions/limitations are mostly not preserved".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-13-Center]

Therefore, to secure the benefits offered by the Internet for the development of children, their online activity requires monitoring by adults – first of all by parents. For them to navigate safely online, parents have to cooperate in this respect with the representatives of the public and private sector by joining efforts particularly through applying computer programmes that would facilitate control over their children's behaviour online.

2. Children's Behaviour Online

Contacting persons that children do not know in reality
The results of discussions in focus-groups and the analysis of the seminars' reports show that most children use the Internet as an instrument to look for new acquaintances. About 78% of the interviewed children reported that they have been looking for new acquaintances through the Internet during the last year (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of answers to the question "Which of the following actions did you undertake over the last 12 months"?

	YES	NO
I looked for new acquaintances through the Internet	78,2%	21,8%
I added in my friend's list on my personal profile on social networking sites persons that I did not meet in reality	74,6%	25,4%
I happened to exchange compliments online with unknown persons of the opposite sex	42,8%	57,2%
I exchanged data with someone I only from the Internet	38,1%	61,9%
I sent a photo of mine to a person I knew only from the Internet	36,5%	63,5%
I preferred to present myself in the Internet as some other person than I actually am	25,5%	74,5%
I sent videos about me to a person I know only from the Internet	15,7%	84,3%

The analysis of results on certain socio-demographic variables shows that in fact looking for new acquaintances is specific more often for children 15-16 years old (about 21%), girls (50.9%) and children from villages (62.1%). Adding of persons not known in reality to the friends' list on the personal profile on social networks was more often practiced over the last 12 months by 16-year old children (23.3%), by those from the rural area (61.7%) and females (50.9%). An alarming thing is presenting oneself under a different personality, which is practiced by 16-year olds (24.8%) and those from rural area (63%). Exchange of data is more often practiced by adolescents in the age of 16 (28.7%), children from rural area (62%) and boys (52.6%). Over the last 12 months, sending photos has been one of the actions that were undertaken more often by boys (55.1%), children in the age of 16 (26.8%) and those from the rural area (62.6%).

Sending videos was practiced more by children aged between 15-16 years (about 22%), boys (60.2%) and those from the rural area (57.3%).

Most often, children make friends through social networking sites. The process is so simple that by making one click children add people they have never met in reality to the friends' list on their personal profile. This way of making new friends was reported by about 75% of the interviewed children (see Table 3). It should be mentioned here that one of the reasons for children to do this is explained by a desire to break the records within their gang with the number of friends on the personal list on the social-networking site, as well as by a desire to gather as many as possible allies/supporters for the online games offered to the members of the same social networking site.

"I, and all my friends who have a profile on social networks, I think, accept and have in my friends' list some "friends" – unknown persons whom I never saw in real life. You know, it is quite fancy now to have as many friends as possible on your personal profile".
(Boy, 12 years old, [FG-8])

"Quite worrying is the fact most children that access social-networking sites accept strangers as "friends". When asked why they do this, children aged 12-13 answer: "The more friends you have in the network the "cooler" you are. Besides, children especially enjoy receiving marks "5+" to their photos posted on the website "Odnoklassniki".
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

"I accept as friends in social network as many persons as possible, even strangers, simply because I want to have as many allies as possible in the social network games. For instance, there are games where it is important to get support for any action from the people who are part of the network…"
(Girl, 13 years old, [FG-4])

It should be noted that the discussions in focus-groups revealed that adolescent girls accept in their friends' list on social networks older men or boys, while boys prefer to find older virtual girlfriends considering mainly the exterior appearance. The results of the quantitative study reveal that 66.1% of girls met with male persons whom they got to know through the Internet, and 68.7% of boys met with the girls known online.

According to children's reports, about 43% of the total number of those interviewed exchanged compliments online with unknown persons of the opposite sex. It is interesting that it is typical for both girls and boys regardless of the area of residence and age. There is still predominance in this respect among persons of the age of 16 (27.1%), among boys (53.1%) and among those from the rural area (56.4%). It is an additional argument confirming that 12-16 year old children are in an active process of self-perception in terms of gender and sexual development. At the same time, we cannot leave out the fact that online exchange of compliments is a stratagem pedophiles often apply in the process of children grooming for their future sexual exploitation.

Table 3 reflects the most common risky actions undertaken by children online. As we can observe from the statistical data in this table, the share of children in our country that manifest risky behaviour is quite high. It is worth mentioning, that the share of children who simultaneously indicated that *they added persons they haven't met in real life to their*

friend's list of their personal profile on social networks and that they *exchanged data with somebody whom they knew only from Internet* is 33.8% of the total number of interviewed children (or 455 persons). Moreover, about 6% of the interviewed children (i.e. 81 persons) answered "yes" to all examples of risky actions listed in table 3. The analysis of the socio-demographic data in this category of children shows that they have different ages both from the urban and rural areas, with a small inclination towards boys; more than a half of them live in the central part of the country, and the least in the South.

Given that in the Republic of Moldova there is an increase in the number of cases of sexual exploitation of children, especially by foreigners, the present study set the goal of identifying the share of children who met persons from other countries through the Internet (except for relatives). In this respect, 1,059 children or 78.6% of the total number of those interviewed were identified. Though the interviewing did not allow specifying from whom the initiative to get acquainted originated – the child or the foreigner – the reports of the seminars show that 8 in 10 children reported that they were contacted online by unknown persons (both from other countries and from the Republic of Moldova).

Sexually-coloured communication online and indecent proposals online
When asked about the topics of communication with people from other countries whom the children met through Internet and with whom they communicate

exclusively through the Internet, the answers reflect the following picture: music/photo/games – 28.1%, hobby related things – 18.2%, culture, sport, traditions of foreign countries – 14.9%, studies – 13.9%, relations with boyfriend/girlfriend – 13.4%. At the same time, 6.2% of the interviewed children recognized that they discuss with these persons topics of sexual nature. More than 4% of the interviewed children indicated that they discussed also other topics without specifying them (see Figure 8).

Fig. 8. "What are the topics that you discuss with persons from other countries that you know from the Internet and with whom you communicate only through the Internet?"
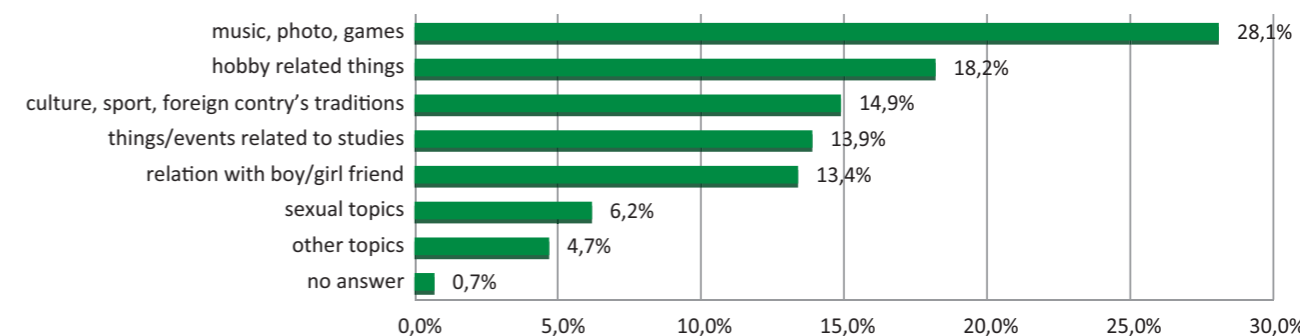
When asked about the proposals made to them by people from other countries, in most cases children's answers were related to exchange of personal photos (23.2%), exchange of contacts – telephone, address etc. (22%), proposals to meet (21.4%), proposals to exchange links/web-sites and files (14.9%), and a part of the answers (7.4%) demonstrate that some children received certain indecent proposals (see Figure 9). And reports of awareness-raising seminars show that one in ten children, who came to know persons online from other countries, received from them indecent proposals online. Out of 165 children that discussed on the net sexual topics with persons from other countries whom they came to know through the Internet, 57% are boys, respectively, children aged 15-16, and the share of those from the rural area makes 56.4%. These numbers speak for themselves and represent just the most risky results of online communication with unknown persons.

"Having a profile on Facebook, I was contacted by an unknown man with a name seemingly from a Western country, at least he pretended to be so. So he wrote that he is 41 years old and without starting other topics of discussions said that I have a very beautiful Russian name, which is known all over the world and that he wants to have sex with me. And that I won't regret, if I accept. I felt humiliated by this indecent proposal and stopped communicating with him by blocking this user".
*(Girl (Natasha), 15 years old, [FG-7])*

Fig.9. "If you got acquainted from the Internet with persons from other countries (except for relatives) and communicate with them only through the Internet, what proposals did they make you?"
(data referred to 1059 respondents that got acquainted with)

exchange of personal photos	23,2%
exchange of contacts (telephone, address etc.)	22,0%
meet this person	21,4%
exchange of links/sites/files	14,9%
made me some indecent proposals	7,4%
others	0,4%
did not make me any proposals	10,6%
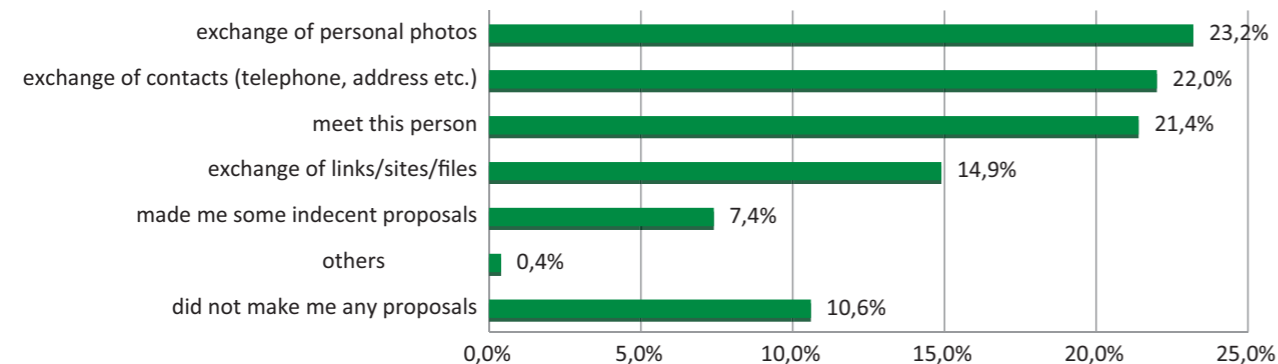
It should be noted that 10.6% of children did not receive any proposals from persons from other countries known online, and an insignificant percentage (0.4%) reported other variants of answers regarding the proposals made online, most common "let's be friends on the net". The results of the study show that there is a connection between the child's age and the risks he is exposed to in communication with people from other countries. 12-year old children reported, 13.4% of the total number of cases, that they received indecent proposals while those of 16 years of age reported the same thing in the share of 29.3% (see figure 10).

Fig.10. Number of children who indicated that persons from other countries known online made them indecent proposals

12 years	13 years	14 years	15 years	16 years
13,40%	14,60%	15,90%	26,80%	29,30%
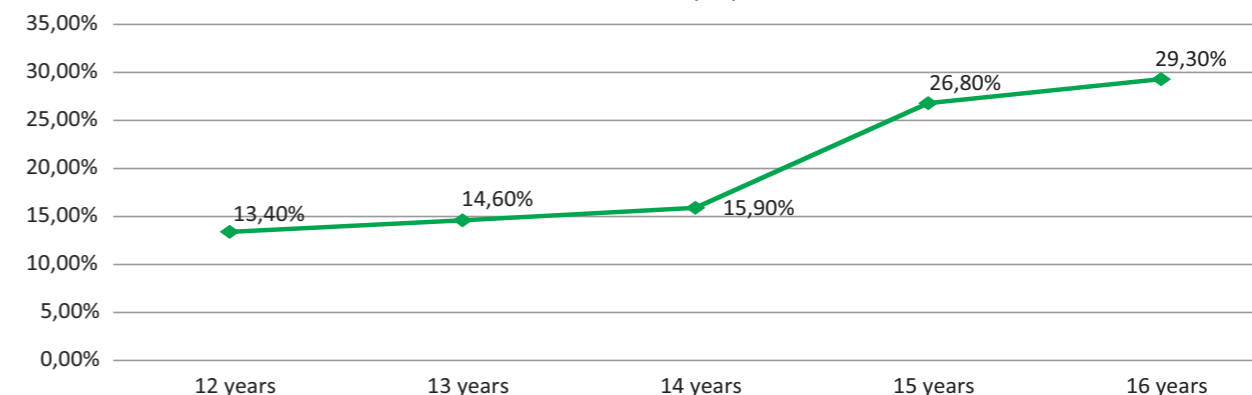
We remind you that these questionnaires preceded the awareness-raising seminars on children's safety online, so they were informed about the possible outcomes of these risky actions undertaken online. When asked before starting the safety online awareness-raising activity (just like in focus-groups), one in 4 children that got acquainted with unknown persons online, answered that he stopped communicating with them or deleted from the friends' list of social-networking sites as a result of unpleasant situations in contacting these persons.

"Through Internet, I met a boy from Italy (at least he wrote so). But soon he began to ask me some things… and began to talk ugly to me. I just blocked communication with him…"
(Boy, 14 years old, [FG-6])

"I was glad to find out that many children who received indecent proposals online from unknown persons through social networks responded by deleting them from the friends' list/blocking the access to their profile. Of course, group discussions did not facilitate revealing intimate details of such communication".
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

At the same time, more than a half of the children asked within the seminars and focus-groups about what makes them communicate with persons from other countries indicated fun interest, and one in 5 children consider such communication useful. According to teachers of computer sciences and educators, one of the reasons of "utility" is the possibility to practice a foreign language. It should be considered that in many cases, online communication does not imply sexually-coloured discussions and aims at socialization between peers.

"Children in the age of 12-16 tend to get acquainted with persons from other countries. Even the English language component is considered by them as a way of learning a language of international communication. For this purpose, they even access popular chats from other countries".
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

"When we ask children what are the topics covered in their communication with persons from other countries met online, most often we receive answers like: "The person I communicate with often asks me what I am doing", "Asks me what's new", "What did you do?", "How are things at school?", "What are you going to do?"… Girls are very pleased to receive compliments online, when someone tells them they are beautiful".
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

Thus, besides the advantages it offers, the Internet also bears some risks for children and this study brings additional evidence of the fact that most children-users of the Internet in the Republic of Moldova faced some or more of these risks.

Exchange of personal data, photos and video with persons met online

Of the total number of interviewed children, 4 in 10 exchanged data with persons whom they knew only from communication on the net. Among them 28.5% are 16-year old children, particularly girls (51.6%), predominantly from the rural area (58.9%). As a rule, personal data is information that could be potentially used to identify the child – name, surname, contact numbers, home address or name of the educational institution etc. Experts who know about pedophiles' behaviour specify that these data are obtained from children in an innocent way after they have earned trust. Thus, when a pedophile that communicates with a child online considers that he is "prepared" for closer relations and positively assesses his chances, he

intensifies his tactics reaching children by telephone or seeking personal meeting.

It should be noted that 23% of children who received proposals from persons from other countries (with whom they communicate exclusively through the Internet) to exchange personal photos (see Fig. 9), particularly regarding 16-year old children (27.4%), boys (51.4%) and from the rural area (59.1%). Also, more than 36% of the interviewed children have sent their photos to persons they knew from online only, of whom more often it happens among 16-year old children (26.8%), boys (55.1%) and children from the rural area (62.6%). All these should put parents and educators on guard. Of course, many children do this out of the desire to share photos online, out of curiosity, desiring to see the virtual "friend". At the same time, it should not be ignored that the child's appearance is what the paedophiles are interested in – often, after a period time, they ask for children's photos and videos in less decent postures. After being sent, they can serve as basis for blackmailing

in potential situations when children "change their mind" to communicate with the pedophile. It should be specified, that 15.6% of the interviewed children sent video clips to a person whom they know only from the Internet (see Table 3). It's true that these data should be treated with caution, because the content of the video materials sent by the children is not known.

It is known that when a pedophile is looking for a potential victim on the net, he often presents himself as being in an age close to the child's age, and sometimes sends photos of some child to represent him. Imagining an online friend of his own age, the child is much more

open in communication, predisposed to funny actions and doesn't associate such communication with any risk. At the same time, many children, including those who participated in training seminars and focus-groups did not even think that behind the sent pictures there can hide a completely different person than it appears on the photo. It is worth mentioning here that 3/4 of the interviewed children preferred to represent themselves in the Internet exactly the way they are in reality, and the rest preferred to represent themselves as another person (here are included the situations when, for instance, children are represented themselves as being older than 18 years old).

"I often ask children how sure are they that it is the exactly this person behind the photo sent by the one they came to know online? And often I get answers like: "You know, I did not think about that…"
(Youth programme coordinator, [NGO-5])

"Suspicion comes only when the person on the photo looks like a supermodel, the picture being like taken from the cover of a "glamour" magazine, this is when I realize that something is wrong…"
(Girl, 15 years old, [FG-3])

"One day a pupil approached me and asked if it is possible to find out who writes him on the net, because from online discussions he wasn't sure he was communicating with the person from the photo. He asked if it is possible to find out exactly, who this person is, the one he communicates online… I told him that in most cases you cannot discover exactly who that person is…You can identify the city from where he accessed the Internet, but it's impossible to find out who exactly is there on the other end of the online communication channel… I just recommended him, in case if he has doubts/suspicions that the person presents himself on the net as someone else than he is in reality, to totally ignore that person".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-11-North])

In this context, children should be informed about the consequences for their real life, the results of the actions undertaken in the virtual space.

Meetings offline with persons known online

The children's questionnaires revealed that more than a half of them met at least once in reality with somebody they came to know through the Internet (see Figure 11). This is especially typical for 15-year old children (27.4%), boys (55.6%) and children from the villages (53.2%). The data show that 20% of the children who met with persons from other countries known through the net informed their parents about that, 34.5% told his/her friend, and 14.5% did not tell anybody. Also, 6% of the children who indicated that they met in reality with persons from other countries known from online mentioned that they discussed sexual topics and 8.2% indicated that they received indecent proposals.
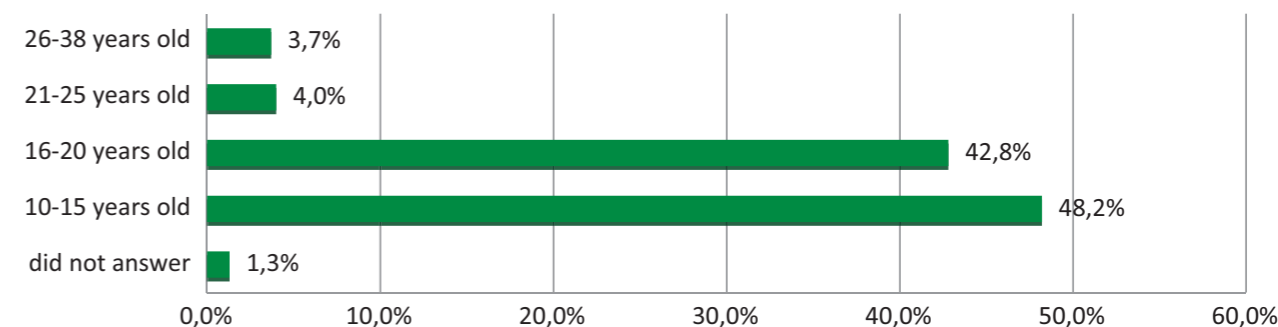
A negative answer in this respect was given by 38% of children (see Figure 11), mainly they were 12-13-year old children (23% on average) and girls (59%), while 11% mentioned that they did not meet, but had or were having such an intention at the time of the interview. This temptation was shown mainly by 12-year old children – 22.9%, girls – 52.1% and those from villages – 68.1%.

Fig.11 "Did you ever met in reality with someone whom you came to know from Internet (except for relatives, if you came to know them in this way?)"
(data referred to 1,059 persons, who got acquainted with persons from other countries through the Internet)

The discussions in focus-groups and the analysis of reports from awareness-raising seminars show that ¾ of the total number of interviewed children communicate online with their peers from the Republic of Moldova. In the questionnaires, when asked about the age of persons they came to know online and met offline, in most cases, the answer was: their peers, having predominantly the age between 10-15 years old (48.2% of the interviewees), 16-20 years old (42.8%), 21-25 years old (4%), and 3.7% of children indicated the age range of their friends as 26-38 years old. Considering the fact that the question excluded the children's relatives, we do not know who those persons were and what the purpose of their meetings with children was.

Fig.12. "If you have ever met in reality with someone, whom you came to know from the Internet, what was the age of that person?"
(data referred to children who met offline with persons known online, citizens of RM and other countries)

Anyway, within the discussions in focus-groups and during the awareness-raising seminars, children reported situations when the age indicated by a person known onl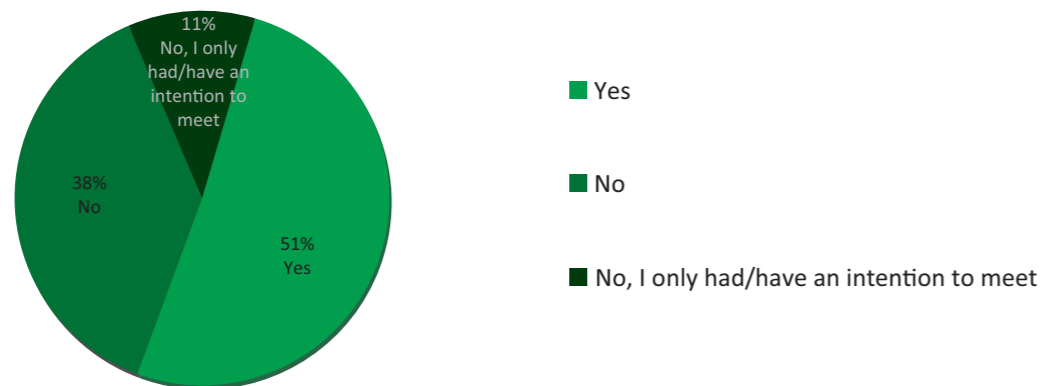ine did not coincide with the real age. It is really a problem: the truth about the age of persons known online becomes known only at the time of personal meeting, i.e. offline.

"I met a boy through "Odnoklassniki"... We communicated a while and I came to like him, because he was funny. When I accepted to meet him face to face he appeared to be not just the way he was during our discussions..."
(Girl, 15 years old, [FG-1])

"I had situations when children told me that they discussed online with some persons and then they found out that they communicated with another person, not the one that person pretended to be ..."
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-4])

"Children should be informed about the risks of Internet navigation … including when they get acquainted and communicate with foreign citizens. The Internet cannot be considered a space with honest and innocent content. People are never absolutely sincere and even less on the Internet. A child should be protected, but how can he avoid online navigation risks, if he doesn't know what danger awaits him there? And even knowing the danger, anyway, he can try, because that's what a human does – you tell him it's hot, but he touches it anyway".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-15-South])

Olga says that when she was 16 years old she arranged a meeting on a social-networking site with Sergiu, a 32 year old man. Only when she saw him, he admitted that in fact he was 41 years old and divorced, without giving any details. "He gave me expensive perfumes and flowers. He did not make perverted proposals", says the girl. One day, Sergiu invited Olga to his place. "He cooked a romantic dinner and we drank some wine. I don't know what happened afterwards, but I regained my conscience in bed without any clothes and next to him. I quietly dressed and left", Olga remembers. Later the girl read an article, where Sergiu appeared as a pedophile, who raped his 14 year old stepdaughter. "The girl confessed word for word the same things that happened to me on that evening. Afterwards, I saw Sergiu once again. He was holding another naive girl by her hand, she wasn't older than 15-16 years. It seemed to me that the girl was a little scared", tells Olga. The young girl says that she doesn't visit this dating site anymore and recommends other girls, who are looking for virtual love, to do the same thing.[19]

The questionnaire included a logical question to children who met offline with persons whom they knew from online – if they told about their offline meeting to their parents or any adult they trust. The results of the study reveal that only one in three children informs his parents about it. Mostly they are girls (61.6%) or 15-years old children (28.9%), from the rural environment (54.7%). Anyway, most children (60.9%) tell a friend or peers about it (29.7%), something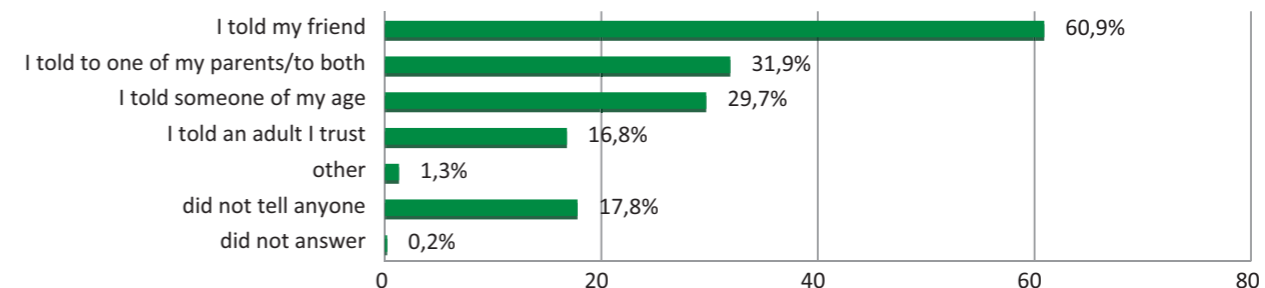 that should be taken into account in the process of development and in conducting awareness-raising campaigns. It is interesting that one in six children (or 17.8% of all the interviewed children), who met someone offline[20] didn't tell about that to anybody (see Figure 13). It should be specified that a small percentage (0.2%) preferred not to give any answer to this question. A part of them (1.3%) wrote other versions of answers, some of which are worth mentioning: "*I have no one to share with", "I tried, but nobody cares".*

---

[19] "Îmi plac fetițele de 15 ani" [I like 15-years old girls]. Jurnal de Chisinau, no. 29 as of 01.04.2011, p. 8.

[20] These situations include meetings with persons both from other countries and from the Republic of Moldova.

Fig.13. "If you have ever met in reality with someone, whom you came to know from the Internet, did you tell anyone about that?"
(data referred the answers of children, who met offline with persons known from online)

I told my friend	60,9%
I told to one of my parents/to both	31,9%
I told someone of my age	29,7%
I told an adult I trust	16,8%
other	1,3%
did not tell anyone	17,8%
did not answer	0,2%

"I had a case when I found out about a child's intention to meet somebody, whom she knew from online – a case that aroused unpleasant suspicions in us. We worried pretty much at that time, together with parents… Finally, the child had no meeting. Since then I tell children to be careful with whom they communicate …"
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-4])

It is worth mentioning that many children do not inform their parents about the decisions they make regarding offline meetings with persons they know online simply because they do not identify any related risks. Among other reasons indicated by children in focus-groups was the desire to be independent in making decisions, especially those which (in their opinion) concerns only them and their personal life.

"At awareness-raising seminars for children on issues of safety online, we always mention that it is important for them to inform their parents or adults, or even go to the meeting with someone adult, when they are going to meet offline someone known from online. The reactions are different – some children nod as a sign of understanding, others object "Yeah, ok… I'll take my Mom or Grandma by the hand and go to the meeting?!…"
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-5])

"You know, now you told us about the risks that are there in the virtual space… I keep thinking – do such things really exist? If parents or a teacher told me about this, I wouldn't believe them, I would take it as a message from the adults who want to replace the mouse in our hand by a book… Anyway, I think it will never affect me personally, in any case".
*(Girl, 14 years old, [FG-2])*

Gender-based analysis of data reveals that the persons, whom children came to know from online and whom they met offline were both male and female, and a small share of children (1.3%) indicated that they had meetings with persons of both sexes (see Figure 13).

Fig.14. "If you have ever met in reality with someone, whom you came to know from the Internet, what was the sex of that person?" (%)

1,3%
0,3%
52,7%
45,7%

- ■ male
- ■ female
- ■ both sexes
- ■ did not specify the sex
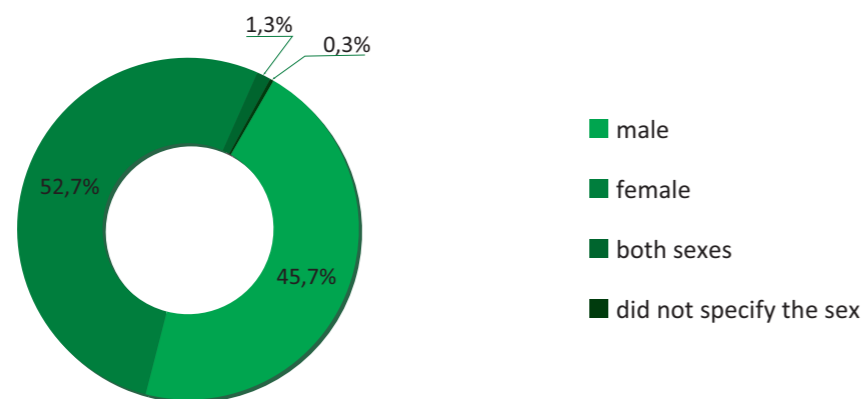
In this study, we tried to trace children's behaviour online, which marked at the same time the most risky circumstances – a) they knew online persons from other countries, b) they received a proposal to meet with persons from other countries, c) they received indecent proposals and d) they communicated on sexually-coloured topics. Thus, of those 56 children identified in this category, almost a half (25 children) indicated that finally they met offline with persons from other countries, known online. Almost every third child (17 children) indicated that he did not meet, and every fourth child (14 children) said that he had or has an intention to meet (at the time of filling out the questionnaire) (see Table 4).

Table 4. Distribution of answers to the question "Did you ever meet in reality with someone whom you came to know from Internet, except for relatives, if you got acquainted with them in this way?" *(from the category of children who ticked several actions – a) they knew online persons from other countries, b) received proposals to meet with persons from other countries, c) they received indecent proposals, d) they communicated on sexually-coloured topics)*

Versions of answers	Number of children in this category
„Yes"	25
„No"	17
„No, but I had /have an intention to meet"	14
Total	56

At the same time, these children's socio-demographic data show that they are predominantly from rural area, more often girls and mostly of the age of 15-16 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Socio-demographic data of children, who ticked several actions – a) they knew online persons from other countries, b) received a proposal to meet with persons from other countries, c) received indecent proposals, d) communicated on sexually-coloured topics.

Age		Sex		Residence area	
12	9	male	23	Rural	22
13	6				
14	7	female	33	Urban	34
15	18				
16	16				
Total	**56**	**Total**	**56**	**Total**	**56**

The analysis of the behaviour of children, who knew online persons from other countries and had all the elements – a) received a proposal to meet with them, b) received indecent proposals, c) communicated on sexually-coloured topics and d) met offline afterwards with persons known online – shows that only a few of the children inform their parents about it, and most of them prefer to tell their friends (see Table 6).

Table 6. Distribution of answers to the question "If you ever met in reality with someone, whom you came to know from Internet, did you tell somebody about it?" *(from the category of children who ticked several actions: a) knew online persons from other countries, b) received proposals to meet with the persons from other countries, c) received indecent proposals, d) communicated on sexually-coloured topics and e) met later offline with the persons known online)*

Distribution of answers	No. of children
I told my friend	21
I told someone of my age	12
I told an adult I trust	5
I told my parent/parents	3
I did not tell anyone	10
Total	51

It is true that when children meet offline with somebody, whom they know through the Internet, in most cases, he is from the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, the geography of persons known online and met offline varies, with top list including the Russian Federation, Romania and Italy (see Table 7). It is probably explained by lack of language barriers for communication with persons from these countries.

About 4% of those who met with persons from other countries hesitated to mention from what countries their acquaintances were. The correlation of children's original regions with the countries of origin of their acquaintances did not allow revealing any dependence, except for the cases of children from Gagauzia, who came to know and met predominantly with persons from Turkey (probably, for the same reason – similarity of the spoken language).

"During the discussions that I conducted in focus-groups, I noticed that about two in ten children communicate with unknown persons older than 20 years. Most often, these persons are from Russia, Italy, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, USA, and France. Children from rural regions, usually communicate online with persons from the post-soviet countries, because they know the Russian language, and those from the cities indicated that they communicate in English with citizens from other countries".
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-5])

Table 7. Distribution of answers to the question: "If you ever met in reality with somebody whom you know through Internet, from which country was that person"? *(from the category of children, who met offline with somebody they knew online, 600 children in total)*

	% of the number of respondents	% of the number of answers
Moldova	62,6	69,7
Rusia	7,2	8,0
Romania	7,2	8,0
Italy	6,3	7,0
Did not answered	4,4	4,9
Spain	2,4	2,7
Great Britain	1,8	2,0
USA	1,5	1,7
Germany	1,2	1,3
Turkey	0,8	0,8
France	0,6	0,7
Ucraine	0,6	0,7
Hungary	0,6	0,7
Bulgaria	0,6	0,7
Netherlands	0,5	0,5
Belarus	0,3	0,3
Mozambique	0,3	0,3
Greece	0,3	0,3
Ireland	0,3	0,3
Canada	0,2	0,2
Latvia	0,2	0,2
Afghanistan	0,2	0,2
Switzerland	0,2	0,2

The fact that almost a half of the interviewed children had offline meetings with someone they knew only online and their parents were rarely informed about that should put them on the alert. A child's safe behaviour online can be cultivated through cooperative efforts of parents, teachers, civil society activists and direct involvement of children.

Accessing pornographic materials online

In virtue of age peculiarities, children are most at risk of being contaminated by sexual or pornographic materials. Using the Internet more and more as a source of information and communication, both adolescents and children accidentally come across pornographic images. Given the fact that at this age they are looking for their gender and sexual identities, accessing such

materials can seriously endanger the development of both sides of the identity making them vulnerable to abuse and violence.[21]

The discussions with children in the framework of focus-groups about the sites they usually access reveal that particularly children older than 14-16 years are more reluctant in providing information about the aspects of online navigation and tend to control their answers. At the same time, those who are younger are more open and sincere in reflecting their activity online. Thus, children, directly or indirectly, admit that they access porn sites, not declaring it though. The interviewed specialists indicated that the most vulnerable age when children tend to access porn sites is 12-16 years, regardless of gender and residence area.

> *"Sometimes I visit "Odnoklassniki", but more often I am searching for women with big breasts. I do that usually when my mother goes to visit my god-mamma, but also when she is at home while she is cooking something to eat... Sometimes I ask my brother to be on the look-out and I search, I stop, then I bide the time and search again..."*
> *(Boy, 12 years old, [FG-4])*
>
> *"When children talk among them during the break, sometimes I hear some things about the sites with indecorous content... Indeed, there are sites that children should not open".*
> *(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-12-Center])*
>
> *"Once, I saw statistical data that 99/100 of Internet users anyway access porn sites and children are the most curious. Even if we try to prohibit, they would access anyway. Often children come to know about these sites from their friends. That's the nature of a child – curiosity makes him find and view especially what is prohibited, he does this anyway, even secretly".*
> *(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-15-South])*

---

[21] "Internetul şi reţelele de socializare: între realizări şi pericole". [The Internet and social networks: in between progress and dangers]. An interview with A. Revenco, President of the International Center for Women Rights Protection and Promotion "La Strada". Timpul [The Time], No. 53 as of 24.03.2011, p. 6.

> *"Children are very curious, they access any site. You know, even at school children make boast about accessing some of the sites at home, so the colleague who listens to that cannot afford failing to access that himself."*
> *(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-4])*

Some specialists indicated that accessing porn sites, including child pornography, sometimes happens involuntary, but arouses unhealthy interest to this content in the child, leading to "normalisation" of this experience or at least reducing the awareness regarding the associated risks. Thus, an educator of an awareness-raising programme for children on safety online when he was telling children of 13-14 years about the existence of the spam that can cause involuntary appearance of some

indecent images on the computer screen and the need to install some filter programs to avoid such spam, a boy immediately and honestly responded: "What, but then because of these filters I can no longer watch porno?!"

However, some children mentioned within the focus-groups that during the chat discussions it happened that someone intervened in communication and sent them pornographic images.

> *"Me and my friends of the same age often spend time in chat rooms (agent mail.ru, skype conference), which allows several persons participating at a time. It happened to us several times that our discussions were interfered by unknown persons who made us indecent proposals or sent us pics with porno."*
> *Boy, 13-14 years, [FG-7])*

Specialists also indicated that sometimes the links to porn sites emerge on the pages of online games or on activation of search engines by simply picking common words of the children's vocabulary. The greatest danger is that, ultimately, children can be easily lured into accessing these sites by persons known from online (often through social networks). It is already a well-known fact that paedophiles send porn images to children known online as a way of studying their reaction as part of the process of manipulation with the final goal of sexual exploitation.

Most specialists express concern about the risk for the mental development of children that freely access

pornographic sites or play online games with aggressive content. It is necessary to prevent these situations, particularly by strengthening the educational role of parents, who often do not know or feel embarrassed about addressing these topics with their children.

Cyberbullying

In the framework of the study the children reported some situations where they became victims of bullying online. Bullying is an action or a set of actions promoted via Internet (also known as *cyberbullying),* involving the use of information technologies and communication, like e-mail, mobile telephony, sites, blogs, the WEB etc. in order to attack deliberately,

repeatedly and in a hostile way an individual or a group of individuals with defamatory messages. Cyberbullying is limited usually by messages sent to a person who doesn't want to communicate with the sender, these messages can contain threats, sexually-coloured words, incitement to hatred, harassment of victims, as well as displaying any false statements aimed at humiliation and defamation of the victim. The threats can be private or public, on forums and discussion groups. Cyber aggressors can disclose real personal data about their victims on sites and forums or can publish materials on their behalf in order to defame and/or ridicule them. Also, some aggressors can send e-mails of threat and harassment, while

others publish gossips and instigate other persons to malicious behaviour against victims.[22]

Cyberbullying also includes situations where children profiles are stolen, their passwords are broken, their new profiles are created, where uncensored/with defaming content information is posted or indecent images are placed. According to the statements of the educators of the "peer-to-peer" Programme who conducted seminars on safety online for children from all the regions of the country (North, Center, South), confessions about cyberbullying were registered practically in every group of children they talked to. So the problem seems to be at the national level.

"When we talked to children about situations of cyberbullying, many (especially boys) admitted that they did edit photographs of their colleagues and stole (most often it happens to girls) the profile... In these cases, they address the administrator of the social site who blocks the profile or deletes uncensored photos..."
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-5])

"Some children reported that they received indecent proposals in messages or some other stuff… They were complaining that their mailboxes were broken and they received different stupid things… Sometimes their profiles and pages from social networks were broken and they were sent different indecent messages after which their team relations get worse … In such cases children often suspended their pages, some of them changed passwords, but most often, they suspended their pages, registering again with different nicknames etc."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-8-Centre])

"I know a case when children sent sms messages that were supposedly from some girls to some boys, indecent messages, compromising.   Children told me about unpleasant situations they faced online. For example, when unknown persons call them ugly words or send them uncensored links.
There was a case when somebody broke a girl's profile, used it to place information on the site as she provides intimate services. The access password was changed and she couldn't intervene. Then the girl was forced to apply to the administrator of the site Odnoklassniki in order to block her personal profile.

[22] http://sigur.info/index.php?/news/latest/hartuirea-si-abuzul-pe-internet-cele-mai-intalnite-probleme-online-in-romania.html, accessed on 05.10.2011.

Another similar case occurred to another girl, who was recommended to be a very good student, I was even assigned with her in a program to Austria… She had a profile on Facebook – and there, in her statute, there was an indecent statement. Everyone was surprised and everybody sent comments, but she couldn't access her profile – someone broke her profile. Finally, she was forced to block the profile and to apologize to all friends from the profile that it wasn't her who placed those words on the site…"
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-4])

"One day 2 girls came to me and told me that somebody had access to their personal profile in a social networking site and used their photos without their consent. There are cases when children get to know the password of other children, enter the pages of others and between the children appear various unpleasant discussions".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-15-South])

At the same time, it should be mentioned that victims of cyberbullying are both the children who are classmates or friends and sometimes their teachers, too. In this situation, it was a student who wanted to cause some troubles to his teacher.

"You ask me, if there were situations when children reported cases of intimidation online. Well, I want to tell you that such a situation happened to a teacher in our region. They took her head from her photo and mounted it to another body – dressed, undressed, as you wish – and placed on the Odnoklassniki.com. As far as I know the teacher phoned to Chisinau, blocked the profile and removed the picture. She found out, from which computer it was done. That was also a child from the lyceum who did this".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-2-North])

Some teachers of computer sciences reported that children are also afraid to be filmed in indecent situations, so that these videoclips wouldn't be placed in web space afterwards.

"...Even the Youtube, you are no longer sure of some things... Someone can film you... and this places you in a risky situation. Children, who know these things are on alert and have a certain fear of such situations."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-9-Center])

The fact that cases of cyberbullying take place and are quite common in our country reflects the lack of responsibility of the population, especially of adolescents, who do such things for entertainment without thinking of the consequences for the person who suffers from cyberbullying. As a rule, actions of harassment in the web space are not perceived as real crimes.

The Division of Information Technologies and Computer Crimes Investigations within the General Prosecutor's Office receive both complaints about the facts of copying of personal profiles on social networking sites and criminal cases on child pornography involving sexual services and dissemination of a minor's pornographic images. According to Veaceslav Soltan, Chief Prosecutor of the Division of Information Technologies and Computer Crimes Investigations within the General Prosecutor's Office, "in the Republic of Moldova, there are cybercrimes, which the society is not aware of yet".[23]

At the same time, the interviewed specialists that knew children-victims of bullying online show that they display such emotions and behavioural reactions as sadness and unstable mood, tension and fear around their colleagues, grief and nervous manifestations, aggressiveness and alienation from children and adults.

"Teachers of computer sciences have to inform children at least about the most common risks they could face online. Children do not know that their personal data and photographs are public, i.e. once placed on the Internet they can be accessed by anyone. The photos can be removed, processed in Photoshop and placed on any site indecently. Children do not realize it, they do not think about consequences".
(Youth programmes' coordinator [NGO-4])

Cyberbullying is one of the frequent forms of intimidation used among peers. Bullying is a social phenomenon specific mainly for organized groups of children, first of all, for schools. Many researchers explain this primarily by the fact that school is a universal arena, a ground to relieve numerous negative impulses that children accumulate at home. The motivation to use *bullying* is different: revenge, reinstall justice, a tool of submission to a leader, overthrow of competitors, various animosities etc.[24] The situation created in the Republic of Moldova denotes the need to study the bullying phenomenon between peers, including online, and organize actions to prevent this dangerous phenomenon among children, including with the participation of teachers from schools.

---

[23] "Attack on a person on Odnoklassniki" []. Timpul [Time], No. 118 (1561) as of 30.06.2011, p. 5.

[24] И.С. Бердышев, М.Г. Нечаева. Медико-психологические последствия жестокого обращения в детской среде. Вопросы диагностики и профилактики. Практическое пособие для врачей и социальных работников. Санкт-Петербургское государственное учреждение социальной помощи семьям и детям «Региональный центр «Семья», 2005. http://www.homekid.ru/bullying/bullyingPart1.html. Accessed: 03.11.2011.

3. The role of parents and teachers in reducing the risks faced by children online

The interviewed specialists state that children who are introduced to the world of the Internet by adults often do not get any indications on how to behave online. Allegorically saying, children are thrown in an ocean without a life buoy. Safe navigation can be compared to children learning to swim in this ocean of information. Some of the interviewed teachers of computer sciences called the Internet a "Trash can", where each and every thing is thrown and becomes accessible for children. Most teachers of computer sciences expressed concern about the risk of affecting psychological development of children who freely access pornographic sites and sites promoting xeno-phobic behaviour and attitudes, belonging to certain sects or online games that develop aggressiveness and cruelty in children.

In the opinion of most interviewed teachers of computer sciences, this problem can be addressed, at least on a temporary and partial basis, by installation of special filters on computers with access to the Internet. These filters can exclude some provoking pages from the children's sight or certain words from the information search engines. Also there are other ways of filtering information depending on the settings of the filter software. Specialists recommend parents to install these filters on home personal computers that children use to access the Internet.

"Filter-software when installed on the computer and blocking adult sites at the time of children's accessing the Internet could be useful for parents who care... This software would benefit children and parents, so the parents could install this software... Now you know that pupils, and even 5-6 years old children, are all sitting in the Internet, they are curious, want to find out more. And many times they see what they should not see..."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-1-North])

"I think it would be very good if filter software was installed on the children's computers at home with access to the Internet, software that protects the child in the Internet from any negative information and blocks their access to some adult sites etc. You know, parents are abroad and no one installs any filters, nothing... It would be better if they were installed at educational institutions where there is access to the Internet for children, because during the lesson, if the teacher is not attentive the child could open some undesirable WEB pages".
Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-2-North])

"I think parents should be informed about children's safety online and about the possibility of installing some special filters even for children from primary classes. I am sure that there are parents who do not know about this, many of them do not know much about computers. They are not aware of how dangerous the Internet could be for students".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-1-North])

"Installing filter software on computers could be a solution, at least a partial one. Practice shows that usually, despite the restrictions imposed by the parents, children try to access the sites with unordinary content out of mere curiosity..."
(Youth programmes' coordinator, [NGO-5])

"Most parents ask me: "What can I do to keep my child from sitting on the Internet for hours?" As a potential solution, I suggest them to install certain filters, so the computer could be connected a certain period of time… But parents say that they can't, it's difficult for them, and I tell them: "Then simply try to take the mouse and the keyboard from them …"
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-11-North])

In the opinion of the interviewed teachers of computer sciences cooperation is required between teachers and parents that can start from raising parent's awareness about the risks online for their children and parents' elementary training on issues of monitoring of children's activity online, particularly by installing special filtering software. In specialists' opinion, parents feel incompetent in front of the computer, because they didn't have the opportunity to study it, let alone installing special programs on the computer.

Information about computer programs that monitor computer activity for parents of children-users of the Internet, with details on the amount of time the child played or worked at the computer, what sites he visited in the absence of parents, what movies he watched or even the possibility to read the child's written texts, the possibility to listen conversations on Skype. This program can automatically report to the parent's e-mail address when the child wrote or searched on the Internet certain words like "drugs", "sex" etc., and is launched immediately at the start up of the computer. They supervise the activity on the computer "invisibly". The program is available for free and can be easily installed for Windows XP-7, and for Mac or Android. For more practical detailes please go to http://kidlogger.net.[25]

According to several interviewed specialists, installation of these filters also could be useful at schools, because even at the time of looking for information for homework, there can emerge windows with inappropriate content. At the same time, some of the interviewed specialists consider it useless to install filtering software, at least in the youth centres with access to the Internet, because it may generate an increased interest to unlock them, and thus to access the forbidden sites anyway. Even if certain blocking programs are installed, adults should be cautious, because children often unlock them.

"We think that we do not need to use such programs at youth centers. The forbidden pages will arouse greater interest to persons who intend to access them. Thus these pages will be accessed by that person at home, at friends' or other computer-room where there is no filter. The personnel at the youth centers should be prepared to talk in a professional manner to a child or a young person that accesses such WEB pages at youth centers. In our opinion this will be more efficient".
(Youth programmes' coordinator [NGO-3])

"Children are very sly today, even in the 7th form already. A teacher cannot even notice that the programs are unlocked."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-2-North])

Another problem that was already mentioned in this report is related to the issue of monitoring when parents are gone abroad and children are left with grandparents or aunt that cannot monitor the children's activity online. According to specialists, in these cases it's more reasonable to cultivate in children the responsible navigation online.

"A lot of parents of the children from our lyceum are abroad. The children are left with their grandparents or aunts. I cannot tell a grandmother to go and verify the history of the browser to see what the child did... Given these circumstances, it might be more reasonable to cultivate in children the responsible navigation online…"
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-10-Centre])

Aspects of safety online include also monitoring of games online, which became a real hobby for many children in the last years. Most of the interviewed specialists mentioned about the need for parents to monitor games that often steel the children's free time. In their opinion, parents should cultivate in children an interest to games that develop logics, as opposed to those, involving hostile and violent scenes.

"These shooting games with violence are not educational at all. These games develop a virtual reality in the children's consciousness, which excludes them from the normal course of life, some views and perceptions of life emerge that are different from reality, but it takes time for them to realize that".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-9-Center])

---

[25] "Copii în siguranță pe Internet" [Children's safety on the Internet] Timpul [The Time], No. 44 of March 11, 2011, pag. 27.

"We should cultivate in children an interest to developing games, logic games where some kind of strategy exists and avoid those simple games with shooting. Yes, it's not easy, the easiest way is to ban, but anyway we will not do anything by banning. We have to show them what is right, to cultivate certain tastes – this is what is right. The child who is taught to think logically and rationally is less inclined to stay on the pornographic sites or playing games without any sense".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-15-South])

In interviews, specialists were asked to give their opinion about the inclusion of a special lesson dedicated to safety online in the school curriculum udner the computer sciences discipline. Most teachers of computer sciences welcomed such an idea – it should help, in their opinion, to reduce the risks faced by children in cyberspace. Specialists think that before the decision is made on including or not of the topic of safety online in the school curriculum, these aspects should be discussed with children at least at the circle times, parent meetings. Some specialists proposed to cover the topic of safety online in the course of optional lessons with children. Speaking about the involvement of teachers of computer sciences in preventing risks online for children, some of the interviewed specialists chose specialized trainings for teaching stuff in the framework of professional training courses, as well as for students of relevant departments who will become teachers in the future.

"Regretfully, during the computer sciences classes, children are not informed about the risks of online navigation. The only focus is places on the studying of the Pascal program, that seems to be useful for very few children, and, unfortunately, children do not know many things about navigation online, these things are not discussed during the classes. Children's safety online should be included in the curriculum as a separate topic, but so far – during optional classes or class planning hours".
(Youth programmes' coordinator [NGO-4])

"I think it would be necessary for the safety online topic to be included in the computer sciences curriculum in lyceums, because now the Internet is at power... I mean that from the start of computer sciences class or even from the second year of study at school, this should be introduced as an optional discipline, like safety rules in the first hours of class, the same should be for safety online – to discuss aspects of safety online..."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-13-Center])

"We are for informing children and young people about safe online navigation both within class hours and in a separate topic under the computer sciences discipline. This topic should be included also at pedagogical departments or training courses should be organised the teaching staff."
(Youth programmes' coordinator [NGO-3])

"Safety online could be addressed in optional class hours. Currently, we do not have such a topic in our computer sciences curriculum. Maybe it is worth including this aspect at the gymnasium level, when pupils already start familiarising with the computer. I do not know how it happens in other regions, but, for example, children that I work with in the lyceum, back from the 5th form at school, already have a computer and the Internet provided by their parents. When they come to the 7th form, they already know many things that we want to tell them. This is why we are awaiting also the opinion and decisions from competent persons from the Ministry of Education."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-10-Centre])

Many specialists indicated that teachers of computer sciences, especially from the rural regions, unfortunately do not address the children's safety online topic. Indeed, none of school curricula include this issue being currently focused on teaching the Pascal. Teachers from the capital and big towns seem to be the most aware about the need to organise discussions with children about safety online. In this context, it is recommended to mention some existing good practices in the country related to raising children's awareness about safety online and their protection in the web space.

"We practice showing a very interesting video about safety online that we produced together with our team and with which we participated in a specialised competition".
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-10-Center])

"At our lyceum, we have a special protection system installed on the computer, the so-called "Microtic". This system allows filtering out certain names of web-pages or excluding certain words."
(Teacher of computer sciences, [PI-5-North])

Specialists report that parents should stay alert in case of situations when they discover pornographic materials in a child's computer, when a child receives telephone calls from unknown numbers/persons, when the child uses a web camera that parents did not know about, when the child uses an online account belonging to some other person, when he closes the computer's monitor or quickly changes windows when parents enter the room or in other similar situations. In their opinion, parents should have a closer communication with their children, so that they do not have any secrets from their parents. The present study makes us think about the role of the Internet in the life of children from the *benefits – risks – harm* perspective. The study shows that while benefits can be easily identified by teachers, children and parents, its risks are more known to teachers of computer sciences from schools and educators from youth centers, and far less or at all – to children and their parents.

IV. Recommendations

IV. Recommendations

Along with advantages offered by the Internet in the life of children – opening of new horizons in obtaining new knowledge about the surrounding world, possibility of communication without boundaries etc., at the same time, we should not underestimate some risks inherent in the Internet that children could encounter online. Data obtained in the framework of the present study should encourage schools, parents, governments, the civil society, information technology industry and children themselves to cooperate in order to establish a balance between the risks and opportunities created by new technologies. In this respect, we hope that the present study will be able to highlight evidence-based priorities to streamline common efforts for the promotion of children's safety online.

Below are specific recommendations for potential actors in the field.

Parents
- Parents should be the ones who should bear the responsibility for the monitoring of the length of the child's stay in front of a computer: the length of stay should not exceed 2 hours per day and the child should not navigate online at night. The computer with access to the Internet should be placed in a room where parents would be able to have access to it and where the monitor is within their sight. If the parents are gone abroad, the online activity should be monitored by an adult.
- Parents should become alert when the child prefers online communication to offline communication and identify the relevant reasons for these preferences. In such cases, in order to avoid eventual future problems of adaptation in the society, parents could intervene by stimulating direct communication activities with children.
- Parents of children-users of the Internet and potential users should raise their awareness in the framework of some thematic hours on the benefits, risks and eventual harm of online navigation. In organising the parents' awareness raising activity it is recommended to ensure cooperation between parents' associations/committees, teachers of computer sciences from schools and activists of non-governmental organisations that promote the topic of children's safety online. These actions could allow increasing the active role of parents in the monitoring of children's activity online.
- It is of primary importance that parents intervene by monitoring their children's activity online. They should be informed about the possibilities of obtaining filter-software/complex parental control programmes for the monitoring of children's access to the computer or the Internet, to be installed on the home computer.

- Professionals recommend parents to talk as much as possible to their children about safety online; it is good for parents to talk to children as navigation partners and not transform the conversation into an interrogation. Along with interesting things observed online, they are recommended to make children talk about their new online acquaintances and especially about proposals to meet offline. In their turn, children should be informed that the major advantage of Internet communication – confidentiality, easy access and global coverage – can be abused by cyber criminals and used to harm them. A real possibility for parents to monitor children's activity online on social networks is to be added in the friends' list of their own child.
- Parents should be aware and understand that repressive measures in Internet usage applied to their children are not efficient. Prohibition is not relevant, even inadequate, counterproductive, arousing children's curiosity and provoking an even more careless behaviour.

Teaching staff
- In order to help teachers and educators at youth centers where children access the Internet, it could be relevant to develop a Guide for children of all ages containing sites, indications and advice on conducting an interactive digital hour describing the formative benefits offered by the online environment.

- It is also necessary to organise a training course for the teaching staff (teachers of computer sciences from schools) in the field of safety online regarding the significance of the Internet in the life of children and adults, its benefits, along with risk situations inherent in it, Internet addiction, use of the Internet as a formative resource and a tool of communication between parents and children, teachers and children on this topic.
- Teachers of computer sciences and form-masters from pre-university educational ins-titutions could be directly involved in raising the awareness of children about the online risks and contribute to the development of safe behaviour online. It is recommended to include a special lesson dedicated to safety online in the school curriculum under the Computer Sciences discipline, with parallel organisation of extracurricular focus seminars for pupils.
- Focus meetings on children's safety online can be organized also with pre-school teachers' staff with a primary goal of orientation of educators in the basic concepts of children's safety online, presentation of educational resources for pre-schoolers intended for educators, as well as professional advice that should ensure responsible and beneficial behaviour online. Educators and teachers from child centers should prepare children, including pre-schoolers, for their future digital life by means of easy and interactive games.

- To mitigate online risks for children – active users of the Internet, it is recommended that all computers at schools having access to the Internet be equipped with filter-software banning the access to certain sites to facilitate the work of people responsible for the activity in computer rooms and make monitoring of children's behaviour online easier. Children should be encouraged to access a list of safe information sites where they can find information necessary for the preparation of their homework and for their intellectual development.
- Steps should be taken to educate children to prevent cases of bullying and intimidation, including online among children. Teachers from schools should be trained how to prevent these situations, and school psychologists – how to interfere in such cases.

The civil society
- Civil society organisations should offer support to public organisations (pre-university and pre-school educational institutions) in training the teachers' staff on aspects of children's safety online. It is necessary to disseminate good practices among teachers and parents, examples of facilitation of children's access to certain recommended sites for pre-school education and preparation of homework.
- It is necessary to organise national awareness-rising campaigns on risks online and precaution measures, including through the "peer-

to-peer" programme. Measures that are needed to ensure safe use of the Internet should be brought to the attention of the public and competent authorities, including those responsible for the amendment of the legislation and change of social and educational perspective. It is recommended to organise a series of multimedia competitions and fun games for adolescents containing messages about safety online programmes promoted through national campaigns.
- In order to prevent risky behaviour online and offer timely solutions to children who request support in difficult online situations, it is relevant to establish a national information and consultation service – Hot Line with a chat facility. This service could offer children, parents and teachers *general telephone consultations* on issues of risks online, sites recommended for certain age categories or those that should be avoided, *psychological consultation, referral to specialists or relevant authorities* in case of complex problems from the sphere of responsibility.
- In the Republic of Moldova, there is a need to develop a specialised website on aspects of safety online, similar to those that exist in European countries (for example, in Romania – www.sigur.info), that would be attractive and accessible not only for parents, but also for teachers and children themselves through a special menu, where they could find advice and useful resources in this respect.

- It is necessary to conduct more studies involving parents and children on aspects of Internet use and the generated risks. The phenomenon of bullying among peers in schools, including cyberbullying, needs deeper studies resulting in recommendations on its prevention, taking into account the experience of other countries in this field.
- Non-governmental organisations involved in the prevention of risks online standing in front of children should cooperate with mass-media in dissemination of statistical data, risks for children and methods of their prevention on the Internet.

The private sector

- Telecommunication companies and Internet-providers from the Republic of Moldova, as part of their corporate responsibility, could contribute significantly to the decrease of risks online facing children. Eventually, they could offer parents, children (future users of the Internet), along with an Internet services package, installation of special filter-software and, eventually, a small training for parents on these issues. Owners of Internet-cafes could also get involved in installation of filter-software on computers and cooperate in distribution of information materials for children regarding safety online. Of course, installation of these filter-programmes is not going to eliminate all problems, however, the chances of a child to run online into violent or pornographic content will, obviously, be reduced.
- The popularity of some social networking sites can be used for the purpose of prevention of risks online for children by means of posting information even on the banners of these social networking sites, highlighting the number of a relevant Hot Line or online/skype consultations.

Annexes

ANNEX 1. Questionnaire for children

	International Centre for the Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights "La Strada" Contact person: Viorelia Rusu tel.: (022) 234906, e-mail: vrusu@lastrada.md	No. of questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

Topic: Safe online navigation

Dear Friend,

In front of you is a questionnaire that is meant to identify some aspects of using the Internet by adolescents, both from villages and from cities and towns. We assure you that your answers are confidential and anonymous. The results of this study are important also to you, too – they will help to study safe methods of navigation online. It will not take you long to fill out the form. Please read carefully the question and the possible answers and tick the box of an answer (or several answers, if specified), that you think is correct. THANK YOU!

Q1. USUALLY, IN WHAT TIME INTERVALS DO YOU ACCESS THE INTERNET?			Q2. WHEN YOU ACCESS, USUALLY, HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND IN THE INTERNET CONTINUOUSLY?				
8:00-14:00	14:00-22:00	22:00-08:00	Less than one hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	7-8 hours and more
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q3: FOR WHAT PURPOSE DID YOU USE THE INTERNET DURING THE LAST 3 MONTHS? (several answers are possible)

3.1. Looking for information needed to do homework	☐
3.2. Online games	☐
3.3. Watching video clips downloading films	☐
3.4. Visiting the personal profile on one of the social networks (for example, Odnoklassniki, Facebook etc.)	☐
3.5. Sending/receiving messages in real-time (for example, Skype, ICQ, Yahoo messenger etc.)	☐
3.6. Sending/receiving e-mail messages	☐
3.7. Reading/browsing news on the Internet	☐
3.8. Using web-camera	☐
3.9. Visiting chat-rooms	☐
3.10. Communication via blogs	☐
3.11. Telephone conversations	☐
3.12. Other (please specify)	☐

Q4: WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS DID YOU UNDERTAKE OVER THE LAST 12 MONTHS? (tick one answer for each line)

	YES	NO
4.1. I looked for new acquaintances through the Internet	☐	☐
4.2. I added in my friends' list on my personal profile on social networking sites (Odnoklassniki, Facebook etc.) persons that I did not meet in reality	☐	☐
4.3. I preferred to represent myself in the Internet as some other person, that I actually am	☐	☐
4.4. I exchanged data (address, telephone number, names of educational institutions where I study etc.) with someone I know only from the Internet	☐	☐
4.5. I sent a photog of mine to a person that I knew only from the Internet	☐	☐
4.6. I sent vides about me to a person that I know only from the Internet (we did not meet in person)	☐	☐
5.7. I happened to exchange compliments online with unknown persons of the opposite sex	☐	☐

Q5. THROUGH WHICH INTERNET CHANNELS DO YOU COMMUNICATE WITH THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES OF PERSONS? (several answers are possible in each line)

	E-mail	Real-time messaging (for example, Skype, ICQ, etc.)	Social networks (Odnoklassniki, Facebook etc.)	Chat-room	Other channels of the virtual space	This situation is not specific for me
5.1. Persons from other countries that you came to know through the Internet and with whom you communicate only through the Internet	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.2. Relatives abroad	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.3. Persons that you came to know through the Internet, recommended by reliable persons (family, relatives), whom you know directly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.4. Persons whom you knew in reality before communicating with them through the Internet	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q6: IF YOU GOT ACQUAINTED FROM THE INTERNET WITH PERSONS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES (except for relatives) AND COMMUNICATE WITH THEM ONLY THROUGH THE INTERNET, WHAT PROPOSALS DID THEY MAKE YOU? (several answers are possible)

Exchange of contacts (telephone, address, e-mail)	Exchange of personal photos	Meet this person	Exchange links/sites/files	Made me some indecent proposals	Did not make me any proposal	Other (please specify):	I did not know such persons
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q7: WHAT ARE THE TOPICS THAT YOU DISCUSS WITH PERSONS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES THAT YOU KNOW FROM THE INTERNET AND WITH WHOM COMMUNICATE THROUGH INTERNET ? (several answers are possible)

Culture, sport, traditions of the country the person represents	Things/events related to studies at your gymnasium/lyceum or university	Music, photography, games	Things (preferences) related to hobby	Topics of sexual character	Relations you're your friend	Other topic(s):	I do not communicate with persons from other countries
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q8: DID YOU EVER MEET IN REALITY WITH SOMEONE WHOM YOU CAME TO KNOW FROM THE INTERNET? (except for relatives, if you came to know them by this way)

Yes	☐	No	☐	No, i only had/have an intention to meet	☐

Q9: IF YOU HAVE EVER MET IN REALITY WITH SOMEONE WHOM YOU CAME TO KNOW FROM THE INTERNET (except for relatives), WHAT WAS THE AGE AND SEX OF THAT PERSON?

Age : _____	Sex: Male ☐ Female ☐	From what country was that person? ☐ Country/countries: _____	I have never met such persons ☐

Q10: IF YOU HAVE EVER MET IN REALITY WITH SOMEONE WHOM YOU CAME TO KNOW FROM THE <u>INTERNET</u>
(except for relatives), DID YOU TELL ANYONE ABOUT THAT? (several answers are possible)

I told my friend	I told someone of my age	I told an adult (older than 18), someone I trust	I told to one of my parents/both parents	To someone else (please specify):	Did not tell anyone	I have never met someone like this
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Your age (completed years):   Your sex:

| 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | Other _____ *(please specify)* |
| ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |

male ☐   female ☐

Residence area: urban ☐   rural ☐

Location: _____

Region: _____

Date of filling out:

_____

CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO THE INTERNET AT SCHOOL/CENTRE

1. Are computers at school/centre connected to the Internet? How often do children access the Internet at school/centre (daily, each day etc.)? Do children at school/center have free access to the Internet? What are the conditions of access? Can children access the Internet at school out of computer sciences classes? If YES, what are the restrictions/conditions of access during/out of classes? What are the sites that children usually access?

2. Approximately, how much time a day does a 12-16 year old child stay in front of a computer? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet by a child? How should we balance this situation?

ALERT SITUATIONS OF NAVIGATION ON THE INTERNET, CHILDREN'S REPORTS

3. What are the signs of alert that you think should put on the alert a teacher of computer sciences/educator or the parent of a child that actively accesses the Internet?

4. Have children ever reported to you about online situations that scared them, made them feel uncomfortable or intimidated? Can you describe this situation? What did you do? How can we protect children to be able to explore the Internet space on their own in safety and profitably?

**MONITORING AND FACILITATION OF CHILDREN'S SAFE ACCESS TO THE INTERNET.
THE ROLE OF TEACHERS OF COMPUTER SCIENCES AND EDUCATORS FROM YOUTH CENTERS**

5. What methods do teachers of computer sciences at schools/educators at youth centers use to monitor children's safe access to the Internet? Are these methods efficient? How can we make the process of monitoring of safe navigation online at school/centre more efficient? Do you know about existence of any filter-software that protects a child in the Internet from negative information and blocks his access to sites for adults and that monitor children's activity online? Do you have such filters at school/center? Do you think that it would be necessary to install such filters at schools/youth centers?

6. In your opinion, what aspects of safe Internet navigation should be addressed with children? Do you talk to children about safe navigation online? In your opinion, should pupils be informed about safe navigation online during some special classes? In your opinion, should this information be organised out of the time of computer sciences hours, or should it be a part of the curriculum?

ANNEX 3. Individual interviews with specialists

Nr.	Interview code	Institution	Sphere of activity
1.	PI - 1 - North	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
2.	PI - 2 - North	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
3.	PI - 3 - North	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
4.	PI - 4 - North	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
5.	PI - 5 - North	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
6.	PI - 6 - North	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
7.	PI - 7 - Center	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
8.	PI - 8 - Center	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
9.	PI - 9 - Center	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
10.	PI - 10 - Center	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
11.	PI - 11 - North	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
12.	PI - 12 - Center	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
13.	PI - 13 - Center	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
14.	PI - 14 - South	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
15.	PI - 15 - South	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
16.	PI - 16 - South	Theoretical lyceum	Teacher of computer sciences
17.	NGO-1	NGO	Center/Youth programme
18.	NGO-2	NGO	Center/Youth programme
19.	NGO-3	NGO	Center/Youth programme
20.	NGO-4	NGO	Center/Youth programme
21.	NGO-5	NGO	Center/Youth programme

ANNEX 4. Focus-groups with children-users of the Internet

Nr.	Focus-group code	Number of participants	Details	Residence area
1.	FG -1	12	Girls/boys, 12-14 years old	urban
2.	FG -2	12	Girls/boys, 12-16 years old	rural
3.	FG -3	13	Girls/boys, 13-14 years old	urban
4.	FG -4	14	Girls/boys, 12-16 years old	rural
5.	FG -5	13	Girls/boys, 15-16 years old	urban
6.	FG -6	14	Girls/boys, 13-16 years old	rural
7.	FG -7	13	Girls/boys, 14-16 years old	urban
8.	FG -8	12	Girls/boys, 12-15 years old	rural
Total	8	103		