

# CHILD SAFETY ONLINE

# 2021

Research on the  
online experiences  
of children from the  
Republic of Moldova  
and the risks they  
are exposed to



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Public Association International Centre "La Strada"

## **Child safety online. Research on the online experiences of children from the Republic of Moldova and the risks they are exposed to**

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# SUMMARY

The pandemic situation, the restrictions imposed and the migration of the educational process onto online platforms has determined the children from the Republic of Moldova to spend more time on the Internet. At the same time, global trends, and the data registered by the counselling and reporting service for online abuse [www.siguronline.md](http://www.siguronline.md), indicate a high level of vulnerability of children to online risks, and more unpleasant experiences and cases of online sexual abuse registered in 2020.

On the same note, a number of policy documents regarding child protection and online safety expired in 2020. Thus, both the social context and the public policy context indicate the need of new data about the behaviour of children online, unpleasant experiences and the incidence of the risks to which children can be exposed online. In this regard, at the request of International Centre "La Strada", Magenta Consulting elaborated the study "Child safety online. Research on the online experiences of children from the Republic of Moldova and the risks they are exposed to". The purpose of the research was to **identify risky online behaviours of children that increase their vulnerability to online sexual abuse**.

We hope that the present research will provide relevant information to the decision-making factors involved in the elaboration of public policies, so that through the actions planned, the rights of children online are protected, risks they are exposed to are diminished and the children who have experienced unpleasant online situations can receive a prompt and adequate response from the specialists.

The objectives of the research include:

1. Researching online experiences of teenagers from the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of the level of access, interests and practices in using information and communication technologies;
2. Identifying online behaviours of children that increase the risks to online sexual abuse;
3. Determining risks to which children from the RM are exposed online and the vulnerability factors that favour children's exposure to abusive/unpleasant situations online;
4. Analysing the negative experiences of children online, the children's attitudes towards what happened, their reactions and actions taken;
5. Formulating conclusions and specific recommendations based on the main findings.

In order to achieve the purpose and objectives of this research, a mixed methodology approach was used, that included analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

**Quantitative research:** An online survey by self-filling was conducted among children aged 9-17. The sample included 3829 children: 1535 children aged 9-11, 1597 – aged 12-14, and 698 – aged 15-17. The research sample is a multistage layered sample, representative of children aged 9-17 from the Republic of Moldova. In order to ensure a sample proportional to the population number, the data was weighted geographically. The margin of error is  $\pm 1,6\%$  for a 95% confidence level.

Table 1. Sample collected in the survey

Group	District	N (number of respondents)
1	Briceni, Donduseni, Edinet, Ocnita	241
2	Drochia, Floresti, Soroca	278
3	Balti, Falesti, Glodeni, Rascani, Sangerei	488
4	Orhei, Rezina, Soldanesti, Telenesti	319
5	Chisinau	936
6	Anenii Noi, Criuleni, Dubasari, Ialoveni, Straseni	432
7	Calarasi, Nisporeni, Ungheni	289
8	Basarabasca, Cimislia, Hancesti, Leova	262
9	Causeni, Stefan Voda	177
10	UTA Gagauzia	168
11	Cahul, Cantemir, Taraclia	240
<b>Total</b>		<b>3829</b>

**Qualitative research:** In order to obtain qualitative data, 20 in-depth interviews were carried out with children aged 9-17 from Chisinau and other towns and villages.

Table 2. In-depth interviews distribution

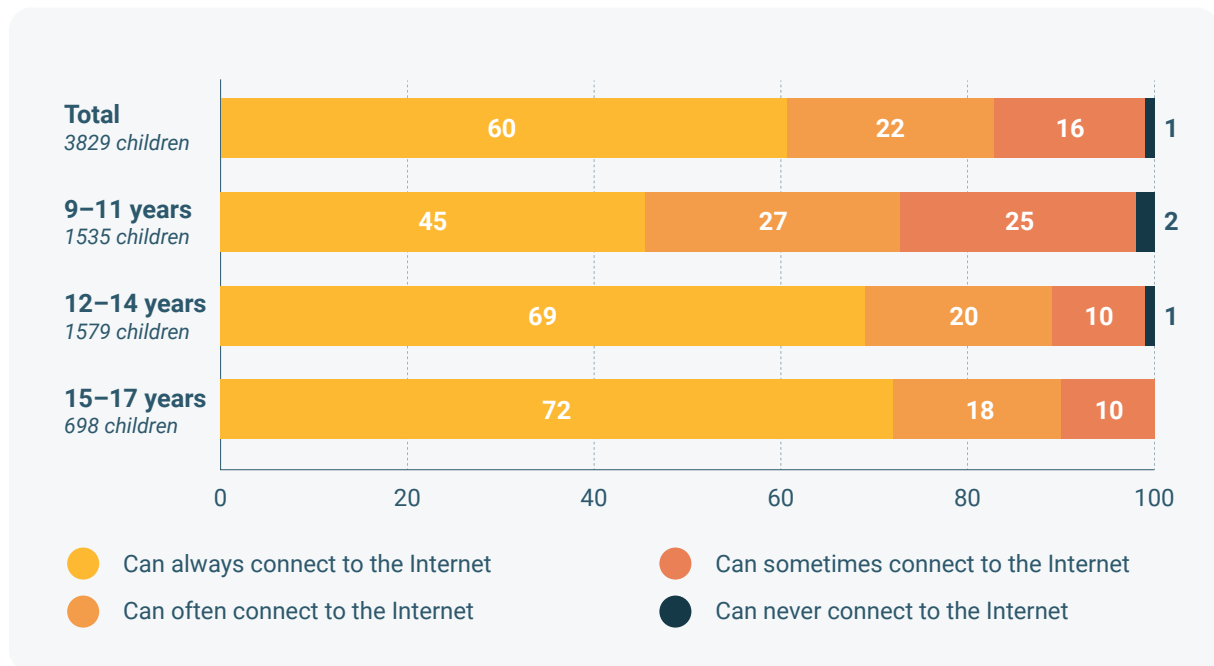
Region	Age	Sex		Total
		Female	Male	
Chisinau	9-11 years	1	1	2
	12-14 years	1	1	2
	15-17 years	2	2	4
Urban (except Chisinau)	9-11 years	1	1	2
	12-14 years	1	1	2
	15-17 years	1	1	2
Rural	9-11 years	1	1	2
	12-14 years	1	1	2
	15-17 years	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>20</b>

Data was collected in the period December 08 – 25, 2020.

## CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

- ▶ The participants to the qualitative study claim that they always have Internet access on their mobile phone. The internet and mobile devices are mostly used for 3 purposes: communication with friends, studying, online games.
- ▶ Data from the survey indicates that 60% of respondents can browse the Internet whenever they want or need, 22% - can often access the Internet and 16% can sometimes access the Internet, and 1% can never. With the increase in age, the proportion of children who say they can use the Internet whenever they need (45% of children aged 9-11 and 72% of children aged 15-17) is growing.

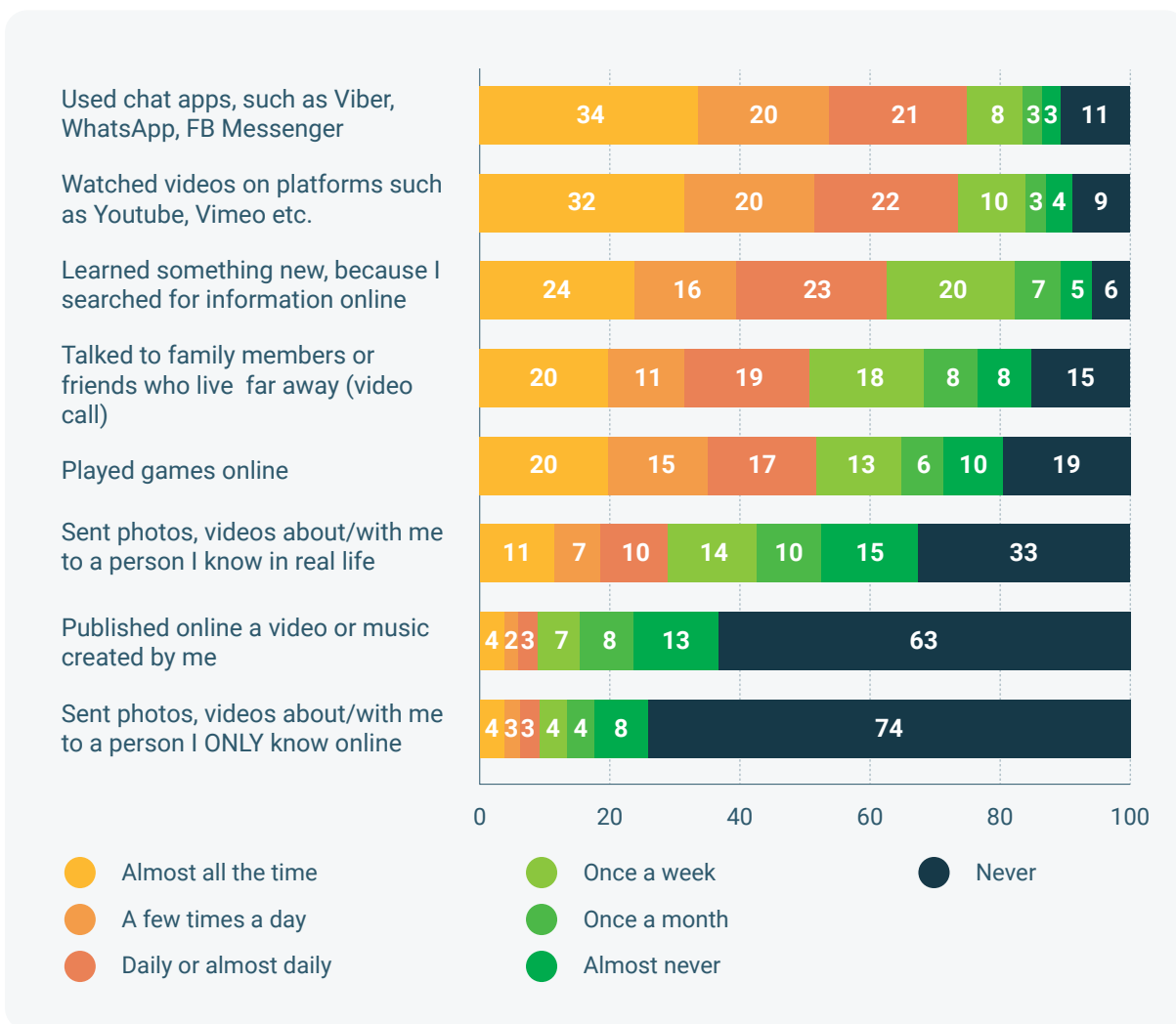
Figure 1. Access to the Internet of children from the RM, depending on their age %



## ONLINE PRACTICES AND SKILLS OF CHILDREN

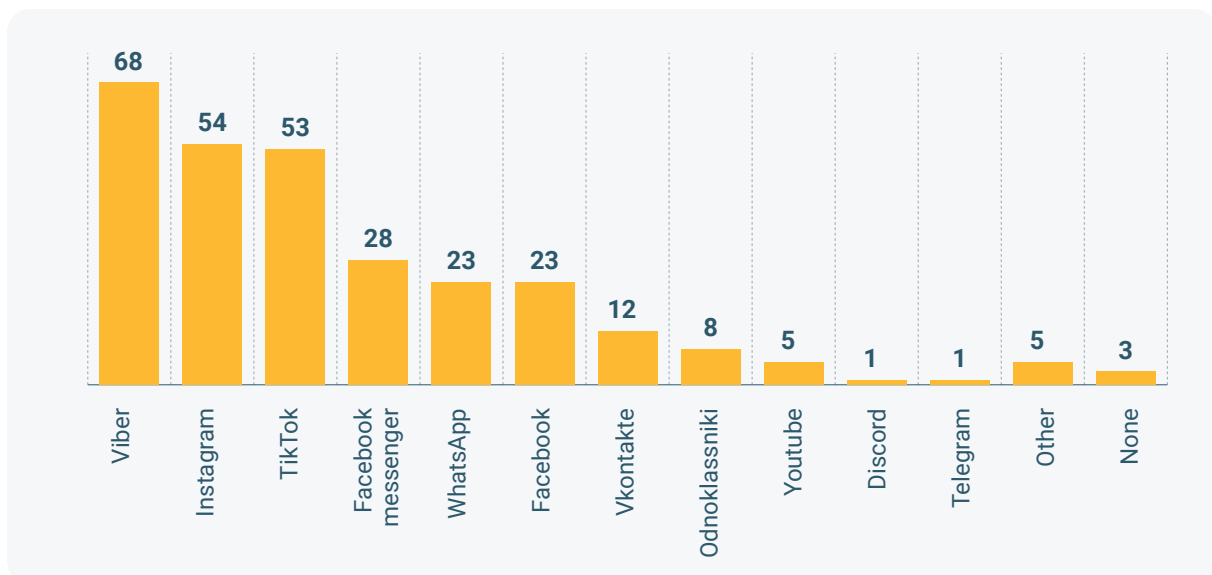
- ▶ 75% of the respondents use chat apps such as Viber, WhatsApp and Messenger every day. 34% of these claim that they use chat apps almost all the time, 21% use it every day or almost every day. A larger proportion of children aged 15-17 use chats almost all the time (46%), compared to the children aged 9-11 (22%).

Figure 2. Type and frequency of children's activities online, N = 3829, %



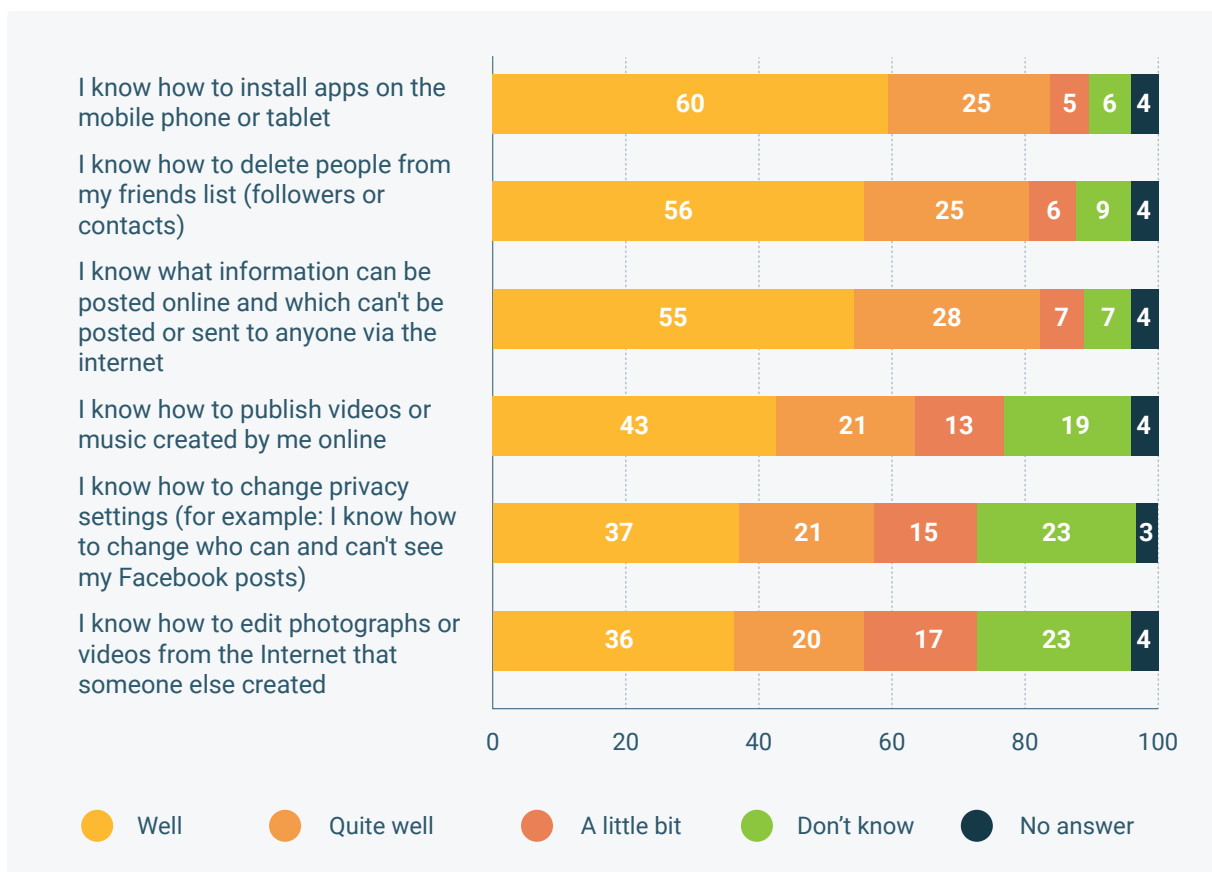
- ▶ The most used messaging apps and social networks among children aged 9-17 are: Viber (68%), Instagram (54%), Tik Tok (53%), Facebook Messenger (28%), WhatsApp (23%), Facebook (23%). Instagram is used by 27% of children aged 9-11, 67% of children aged 12-14, and 85% of children aged 15-17. Viber is the most used messaging app among the children from the Republic of Moldova, especially those with the age between 9 and 11 years. Other popular social networks among children are Instagram and Tik Tok. In 2020, every second child from Moldova accessed Instagram and Tik Tok, both being more popular among children than Youtube.

Figure 3. The most used messaging apps and social networks among children, N = 3829, %



- ▶ Within the qualitative research, several respondents claimed that they rarely post photographs or other content on social networks. A part of the respondents said that they post Instagram stories daily. The respondents claim that usually, they share photographs of books, food, every day life, selfies, Tik Tok videos. About half of the respondents have private profiles on social networks, saying that they don't want many people to see what they post. The other half has public profiles, saying they have nothing to hide from other people.
- ▶ The majority of the respondents (85%) know how to install apps on the mobile phone or tablet. However, many children don't know what kind of information can be posted online, and which can't, and how to change privacy settings on social networks.

Figure 4. Online children skills, N =3829, %

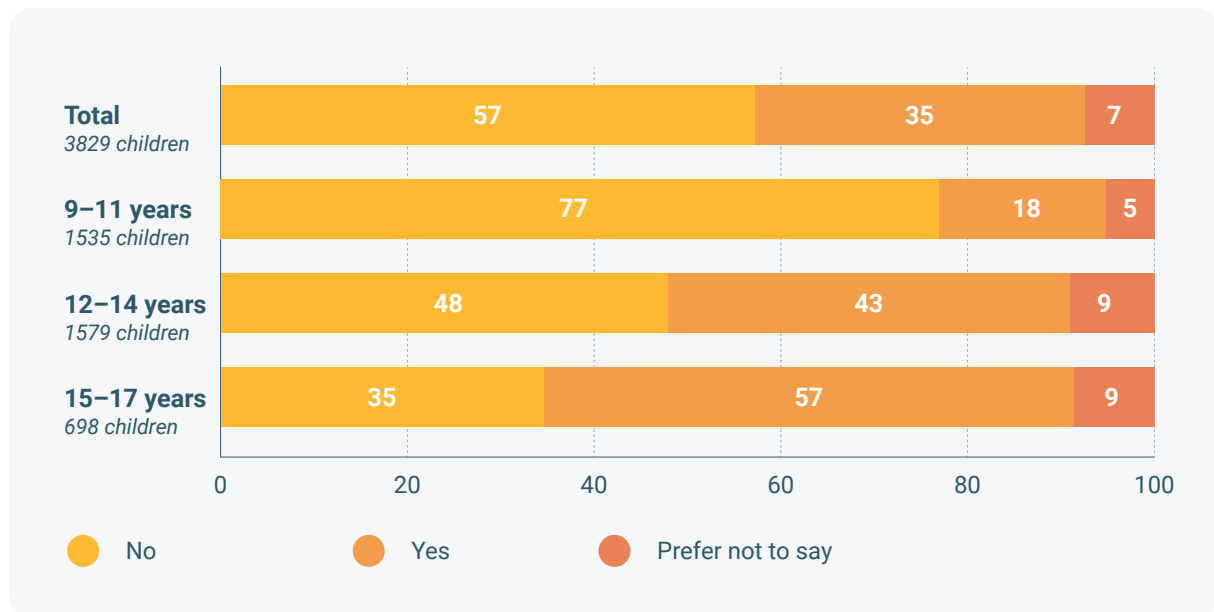




## ONLINE RISKS

- ▶ Communicating online with strangers was mentioned the most frequently by the children participating in the qualitative research when asked about risks of using the Internet. Even though all the children who participated in the qualitative research said that one shouldn't talk to unknown people online, more than half of them said that sometimes they do communicate with unknown people, and others even have online friends that they've never met in real life. 35% of the children interviewed claimed that, at least once, they had talked to someone on the Internet who they hadn't met in real life.

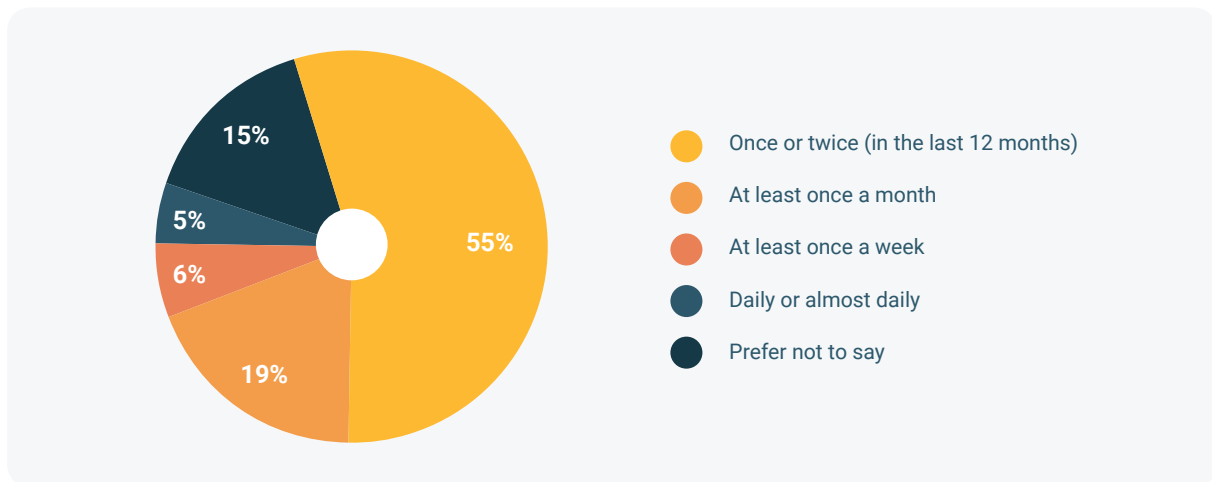
Figure 5. Talking to unknown people online, based on age, %



- ▶ 18% of children interviewed have met up with people they met on the internet in the last 12 months. With the increase in age, the proportion of children who meet up face to face with people they met online is growing. The results of the survey show that, in the last year, 8% of children aged 9-11, 23% of children aged 12-14 and 31% of children aged 15-17 met up in real life with people they only met on the Internet. 2% of the total number of children who met up with people they met on the internet claimed that they were upset by what happened at that meeting.
- ▶ 18% of respondents claimed that, in the last 12 months, things happened on the Internet that bothered or upset them. 55% of them said that these things happened once or twice in the last 12 months, 19% - at least once a month, 6% - at least once a week and 5% said that it happens daily or almost daily. 41% of the children who had something unpleasant happen to them on the internet said that they felt upset or very upset by what happened. The last time something upsetting happened to them on the internet, 38% of children talked about it with peers, 33% - with their parents, and 14% - with brothers or sisters. 24% of children didn't speak to anyone about it.

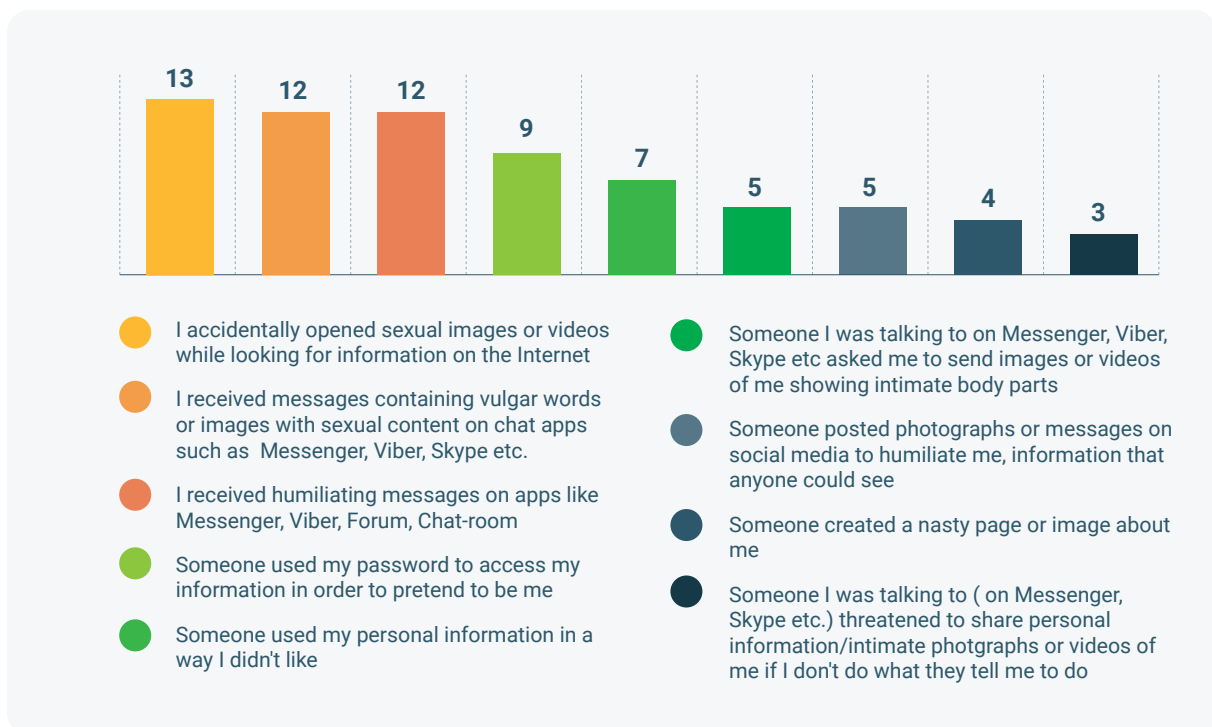


Figure 6. Frequency of unpleasant situations that children encountered, N = 690, %



Children declared that they encountered the following problems in the last 12 months: accidentally opened sexual images or videos while looking for information on the Internet (13%), they received messages containing vulgar words or images with sexual content (12%), they received humiliating messages on apps like Messenger, Viber, Forum, Chat-room (12%), someone cracked their password and accessed personal information in order to pretend to be them (9%).

Figure 7. Types of unpleasant situations that children from the RM encountered in the last 12 months, N = 3829, %



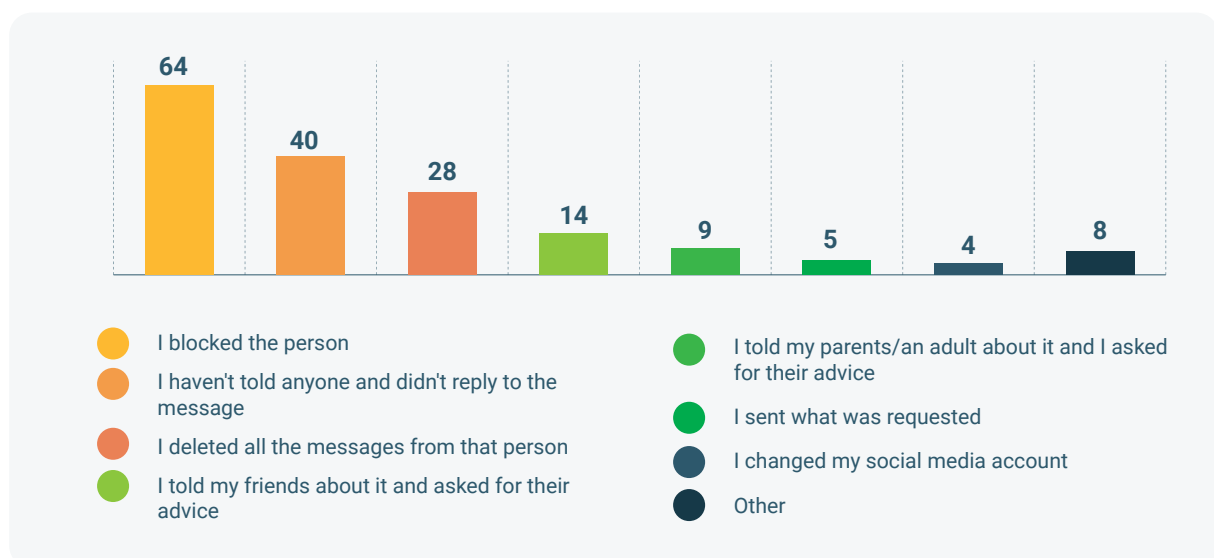
► In the opinion of the children who participated in the in-depth interviews, the following things on the Internet can upset children aged 9-17:

- Violent games;
- Games where you can win money;
- Erotic or sexual content (pornography);
- Cyberbullying;
- Adverts on movie websites;
- Blackmail and threats;
- Assuming one's identity and creating an account on social media on their behalf;
- Swear words and negative behaviours, such as tobacco or alcohol use, violence etc.

## EXPERIENCES THAT INCREASE THE RISK OF AN ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE

- ▶ 3% of the children aged 9-12 years claimed that in the last 12 months, they received videos or photographs with sexual content, images with naked people or having sex from someone online. At 12-17 years old, the risk of receiving videos or photographs with sexual content, images of naked people or people having sex is twice as high compared to the risk of younger children receiving these.
- ▶ Among the 12–17-year-olds, 1% of children claimed that they have sent sexual content, images or videos of their intimate body parts when they were asked to do so. At the same time, the percentage of children who were asked to send images or videos with sexual content is 5 times higher than among 9–12-year-olds. 39% of respondents said that they sent such images to the person they are/were in a relationship with and they know in real life, 18% sent such photographs to a friend they know in real life, 13% sent photographs to someone they only know online, 9% - to a person they met online and they are/were in a relationship with, 7% - to an acquaintance, 5% to someone they don't know. Children sent such content because they believed that it is normal to do so in a relationship, out of curiosity, because they were threatened, or in order to get money or other things in exchange.
- ▶ The response reactions of children to the requests to send images or videos with sexual content usually are to: block the person, not tell anyone about what happened, not reply to the message, and delete all messages from that person. 1 in 10 children choose to talk to their friends or one of their parents about what happened.

Figure 8. Actions taken by the children who were asked to send sexual content online, N = 99, %



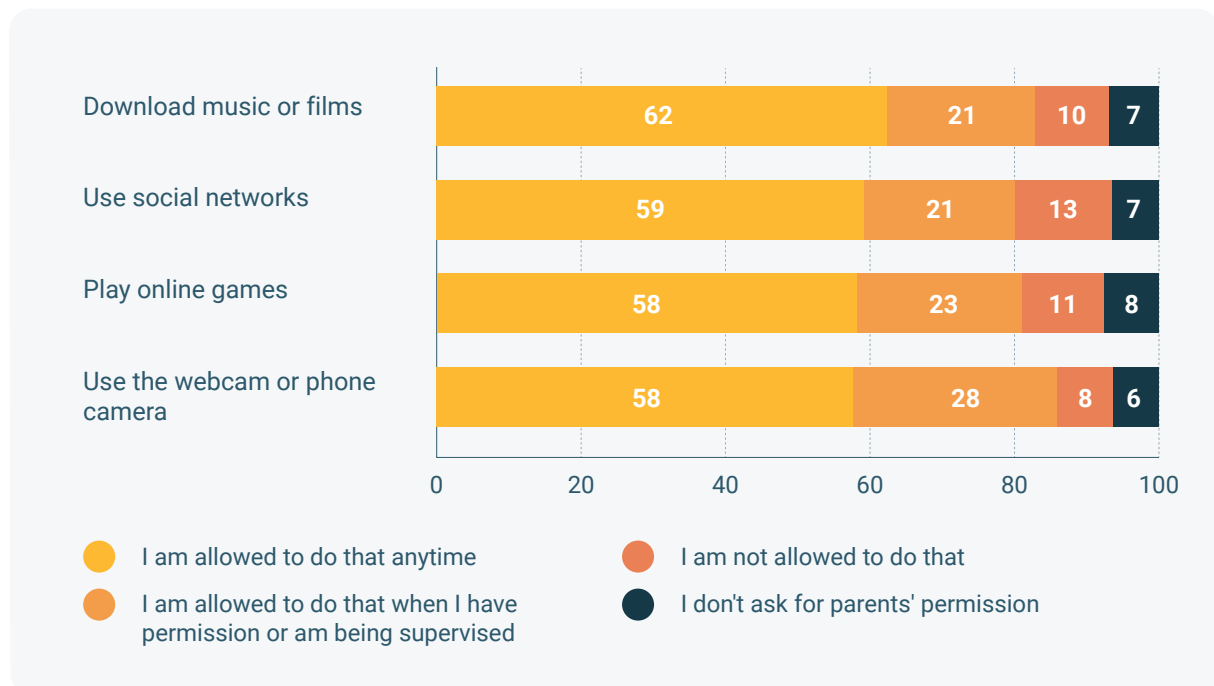
- ▶ Children have a negative attitude towards sending photographs or videos including sexual content. The majority of the children who participated in the qualitative study claimed that it is not good to send photographs or videos with intimate content using social networks. Some children, however, don't think that this is an issue if the images are sent to someone trustworthy (friend or boyfriend/girlfriend). 20% of children think that they can send such photographs or videos if they've been in a relationship for a long time, 13% consider it something normal between two people who love each other.

- ▶ During the interview, the children said that they send intimate photographs or videos because of the following reasons:
  - They are forced to/blackmailed – if they don't send such content, something bad would happen;
  - They are naive, trusting the recipient, thinking that nothing bad can happen because of this;
  - They want to prove that they are beautiful, attractive;
  - They want to impress a boy/girl;
  - They want someone's opinion on the photo, their body, lingerie;
  - *"They don't have enough brains; maybe they are lacking communication and don't know how else to stand out from the other ordinary people and the only thing they could come up with is this"* (F, 13 years old, urban);
  - *"Maybe those who send intimate photos over the internet haven't had enough attention from their parents and are looking for someone they can trust, but unfortunately, it happens all the time that these people are influenced by different nice words, because it is easier to manipulate children."* (F, 14 years old, urban);
  - *"They are being influenced, told that they would get money – show me this or that because I've got some money and I can share"* (F, 16 years old, Chisinau);
  - They are in love with the person they send these pictures to or they have been in a relationship for a long time.
- ▶ Children mentioned the following possible consequences of sending intimate photographs/videos over the internet:
  - The person who requested the photographs could use them for satisfying their personal sexual needs;
  - The recipient could share them with other people;
  - The recipient could subsequently blackmail the sender, asking for money or other goods in return for not sharing the images with other people.

## VULNERABILITIES AND FACTORS OF PROTECTION OF CHILDREN FROM ONLINE RISKS

- ▶ During the interviews, children aged 9-11 mentioned that their activity online is monitored regularly by their parents. Adolescents aged 12-14 are monitored less frequently, while the 15-17-year-olds said that their parents are no longer interested in what they do online, but they used to be when they were under 14 years old.
- ▶ Over 58% of respondents say that they are allowed to download movies or music from the internet, use social networks, use webcams or phone cameras and play games online anytime they want. Data from the research shows that parents are more allowing with adolescents aged 15-17, compared with younger children. 5% of the 15–17-year-olds compared to 34% of the 9-11-year-olds said that they only use social networks with the permission of an adult.

Figure 9. Online actions that parents allow their children to do, N = 3829, %



- ▶ The majority of children who participated in the qualitative study claimed that they have discussed online safety with teachers at school. Less children discussed it with parents. For example, 59% of children said that they regularly talk to their parents about safety rules in the online environment, while 32% said that their teachers are the ones who care to remind them about these rules.
- ▶ When children faced unpleasant situations on the internet, less than half of the total number of children talked to and were helped by parents. Approximately 1/3 of the children were helped to overcome the online problem by a friend or they were not helped by anyone. 7% of children who encountered unpleasant online situations have been helped by teachers.
- ▶ The majority of the respondents (84%) claimed that it is very true that at home they feel safe, 78% said that their family truly tries to help them (in a higher proportion - children aged 9-11, compared to those aged 12-17), and 61% said that they are listened to and heard when they have something to say. This information influences the number of children who talk to their parents about upsetting things from the Internet. 19% of the total number of children find it difficult to talk to their parents about things that upset them. As they grow older, the more difficult they find to talk about their issues: 13% of children aged 9-11, 22% of children aged 12-14 and 24% of children aged 15-17 claimed that they find it hard to talk to their parents about the things that upset them.

# CONCLUSIONS

Research data reveals the following conclusions:

- ▶ Children from the Republic of Moldova are familiar with information technologies and they have access to the Internet whenever they need. 60% of the survey respondents can access the internet whenever they want, while 22% can often access the internet. Even so, the level of knowledge and digital skills that the children have are very limited. Although 60% of children know how to install apps on their phone or tablet, less children know what information should and shouldn't be published online or how to change the privacy settings on social network to restrict the access of unknown people to the content they publish.
- ▶ Children have a low level of information regarding what they should do when they are dealing with an unpleasant situation online. Although in 41% of cases the children were rather upset about what happened, approx. ¼ of them preferred not to talk to anyone about it. Often, children talk to their friends about what bothered them on the internet, and not to teachers or parents. Only 1% of children who encountered an unpleasant online experience discussed it with a professional responsible for protecting children from all forms of abuse (policeman, psychologist, social worker etc.).
- ▶ 18% of respondents declared that in the last 12 months, things happened online that bothered or upset them. The main issues that children encountered in the last 12 months are the following: accidentally opened sexual images or videos while looking for information on the Internet (13%), they received messages containing vulgar words or images with sexual content (12%), they received humiliating messages on apps like Messenger, Viber, Forum, Chat-room (12%), someone cracked their password and accessed their social network account and posted information on behalf of the child (9%). These experiences are usually repetitive and approx. ¼ of the children mentioned that they encounter such issues at least once a month.
- ▶ Research data shows that children aged 9-12 expose themselves to online risks less than older children. When younger, less children have social media accounts, they are in contact with a smaller number of people, and respectively, the risks they expose themselves to are lower. Growing older, the proportion of children interacting with strangers becomes higher. This explains the higher risk of online sexual abuse among pre-adolescents and adolescents: compared to younger children, pre-adolescents and adolescents received more messages including sexual content, humiliating messages on applications like FB Messenger, were asked more often to send images or videos of their intimate body parts or were threatened to have all their personal information and intimate photographs and videos shared online.
- ▶ Usually, the reaction of the children who are asked to send images or videos with sexual content are to block the person (64%), not reply to the message, delete all messages from that person and not tell anyone about what happened. Even though these requests are from unknown people, very few children choose to talk to a parent or another adult about this experience. Both girls and boys aged 12-17 received such requests on the internet and 1% of the total number of children said that they have sent such content. The risk of receiving requests of a sexual nature and of sending such content is higher among adolescents aged 15-17, compared to children aged 12-14.
- ▶ Approximately 1% of the children aged 12-17 mentioned that, in the last 12 months, they have sent images or videos of their naked body parts to people they were communicating with on the Internet. 39% of them sent such images to the person they are/were in a relationship with, and whom they know in real life, 18% to a friend/ person they known in real life, 13% - to a person they only know online etc. Children sent such content for a number of reasons: "it is something normal if you are in a relationship with that person" (42%); out of curiosity, they don't think it's a problem because you can't see a face in the picture (23%); "it is normal, other friends and classmates also do it" (19%); "I wanted

that person to have photographs, videos of me” (12%); “I was threatened that if I don’t do what I am told, they will publish our conversations and friends or family would find out” (8%); “in order to get money and other things, and you couldn’t see my face anyway in the photos/videos I sent” (4%). Children don’t fully perceive the risks of sending intimate photographs, a part of them believing that if their face isn’t seen, there are no risks at all.

- ▶ 71% of the children aged 12-17 claimed that they are totally against 2 people sending each other photographs or videos of naked body parts; 20% think that such content can be sent if the people have been in a relationship for a long time, while 13% consider that it is normal between 2 people who love each other. These figures point out the need to explain to children the risks of sending intimate photographs over social networks.
- ▶ Children from families with a lower socio-economic status, children where a parent or both parents are abroad or those who don’t have parents present a higher level of vulnerability to online risks. In such environments, children most frequently experience unpleasant online situations that affect them more intensely and they get involved in activities that increase their risk to online sexual abuse (send photographs or videos with intimate content, they meet up offline with people they met online etc.). Usually, when these children encounter an unpleasant situation, they either don’t talk to anyone about what happened, or they talk to a teacher or other people in order to ask for help.
- ▶ From what children mentioned, parents are quite permissive in terms of the activities that children do on the internet. Approximately 60% of children aged 9-17 can use social networks, play online games, download music or films, use the webcam or their phone camera any time they want. At the same time, the parent is usually the resource and support person when the child is experiencing an unpleasant online situation: 54%

of children have found out from their parents how to search for things on the internet; 59% of children found out from their parents how to safely use the internet; 42% of children were helped by their parents when they were going through an unpleasant experience.

- ▶ Children don’t know where to find information about online safety, and a big part of them don’t acknowledge the need to be informed about online safety. Usually, children find out how to use the internet safely from their parents or teachers. In unpleasant situations, however, the involvement of parents, teachers and friends in helping the child is much lower. On one hand, this shows the deficient preparation of adults and children regarding the response strategies in cases of online abuse. On the other hand, we are talking about a low level of trust the children have towards their parents and teachers, which in 28% of cases determines them to not seek help and try solve the situation by themselves.
- ▶ The level of involvement of the school in educating safe online behaviours is low. The small number of children who found out about online safety in schools point out the fact that information activities were carried out sporadically. Moreover, children don’t even remember what aspects were approached in the discussions on online safety organized in school. Some children said that they didn’t pay attention in those lessons as they were talking to their classmate. Also, teachers aren’t perceived as someone children trust and that they would turn to in an unpleasant online situation. Only 3% of children have talked to a teacher when an online situation bothered them and only 7% of children mentioned that they were helped by a teacher in such a situation.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Systematically carry out activities about online safety in schools**

It is necessary to integrate online safety into all educational plans and extracurricular activities programs. In order to ensure the consistency and coherence of education in this field, online safety should be discussed with students starting from primary school and subsequently in gymnasium and lyceum. The subjects approached should be adjusted to the age of the children, to ensure topical and interesting content. Interactive teaching methods will be used, which will develop the socialising and communication skills and competencies of students in the online environment.

## **Consolidate the role of the school in promoting child online safety**

The school is the institution that can contribute to educating safe online behaviours in children. The school can also inform parents about online risks and how to help their children deal with them. In order to do so, it is necessary to develop guidelines and a set of measures that every educational institution and every teacher can follow to contribute to the online safety of children.

## **Carry out training and information activities for teachers about online safety**

Teachers remain to be resource - persons that children can reach out to when they are experiencing an unpleasant situation. Besides informing teachers about online risks and the aspects of online safety to be approached in teaching activities with students, it is necessary to train teachers so that they are able to take action in the best interests of the child when they identify or find out about an online abuse.

## **Inform professionals responsible for child protection about the risks of online abuse**

Children coming from a precarious or dysfunctional family environment present the highest risk of vulnerability to online abuse. This is why it is very important to train all professionals so they can recognize and take action when a child is going through an unpleasant online situation. It is necessary to train a diverse group of front-line specialists who are likely to be the first ones to talk to a child in a situation of online abuse: psychologists, social workers, police etc.

## **Develop parental education programs about online safety**

These programs would offer support and develop competencies for parents, guardians and carers for communicating with children about online safety. These programs should be adjusted to the age of the child and must include both aspects regarding preventing risky behaviours of children online, and response actions and solutions in assisting children who are dealing with online issues.

## **Inform children about response actions to be taken in unpleasant situations online**

Children should be informed about the services that are available to them when they are dealing with an unpleasant situation online. Children should also be informed about what situations are in fact abuse and need to be directed to professionals who are responsible of protecting them. Online or telephone counselling services and tools for reporting cases of online abuse should be widely promoted.

## **Carry out information and awareness campaigns about online risks**

Because the level of acknowledgement of online risks among children is still relatively low, it is necessary to periodically carry out information campaigns about the most frequent/current online risks. Because children most often reach out to friends when dealing with an unpleasant experience online, it is important to encourage the involvement of students in the school community in promoting friendly messages and advice for their peers regarding online safety. It is also recommended to inform children about the risks of using the internet by telling them about concrete examples/situations when other children had problems in the online environment.