Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Artificial Intelligence and Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children

A Double-Edged Sword

Executive Summary, 2026

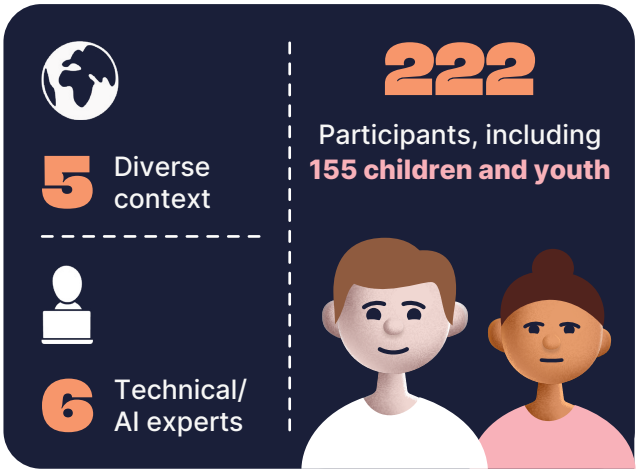
1. Introduction and Context

This report, *Artificial Intelligence and Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children, a Double-Edged Sword,* examines the complex intersection of rapidly expanding Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies and the safety and well-being of children globally. AI, defined as computer systems performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, presents immense opportunities for education, productivity, and creativity. However, this same technology has become a powerful accelerator of child sexual exploitation and abuse. The report establishes an urgent context: offenders are using AI tools to scale the production and spread of Child Sexual Abuse Material , facilitate grooming, and execute sexual extortion, often through hyper-realistic "*deepfakes*." Critically, the development and public release of AI is significantly outpacing global laws and regulations. This legal delay creates a gray area that promotes impunity and allows technology companies to deploy powerful systems without mandatory ethical safeguards. The central thesis of this report is to explore this "*double-edged sword*" by grounding the technical and legal risks in the voices of children themselves.

47 Sources of academic and gray literature

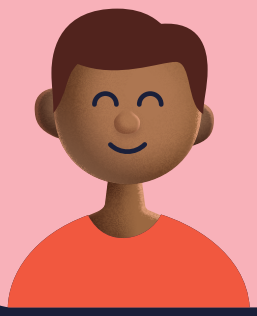
2. Methodology and Scope

This study followed a rigorous qualitative research design based on a three-part methodology conducted across five diverse contexts: Cambodia, Nepal, The Philippines, Kenya, and children and young people displaced from Ukraine (in Poland and Slovakia). The first component was a Systematic Desk Review of 47 sources of academic and grey literature, which established the existing online sexual exploitation and AI landscape. Second, Semi-structured Interviews were conducted with six technical/AI experts who provided in-depth insights into online child safety. Finally, the primary data was gathered through Focus Group Discussions, where a total of 222 participants, including 155 children and young people, and 67 stakeholders, engaged in participatory consultations to share their perspectives on AI use, understanding, and risk perception.



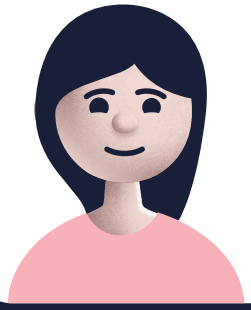
3. Key Findings: Children's Perspectives on AI

Children's discussions revealed critical messages about their relationship with AI, touching upon use, conceptualisation, and risk perception. Their findings demonstrate that their relationship with AI is complex, valued, yet often conceptually limited.



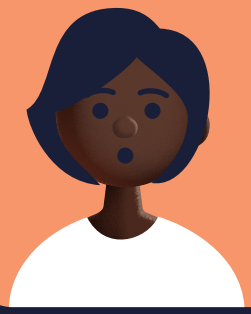
"We frequently use AI and for many purposes, depending on where we live, our age and gender."

1. Children across all contexts primarily use **AI for educational, creative, and entertainment purposes**, frequently mentioning apps like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Siri. A notable finding was the use of AI chatbots for **emotional support** by children coping with social isolation, particularly among those displaced from Ukraine.



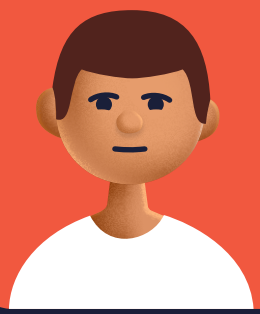
"We define AI as technology that performs tasks to serve humans."

2. Children conceptualise AI in functional terms as a **neutral "*application*," "*software*," or "*machine*" that exists to make life "*faster*" and "*easier*."** This view emphasizes the service provision aspect over the cognitive, human-like element.



"We are unsure how AI relates to humans or social media."

3. Children often conflate AI with general digital platforms like social media or gaming. They have mixed opinions on whether AI can be a "*friend*" or is simply a tool, reflecting **limited conceptual clarity around its technological boundaries.**



"We have differing feelings about AI, some of us are excited, some worried, and others are mixed."

4. **Feelings are polarised**. Excitement centers on AI's convenience and utility, while worries focus on misinformation, losing control over personal data, and the risk of over-reliance.

"We don't fully understand how AI works and this limits our ability to oversee consequences."

5. **Concerns about data and privacy** focused primarily on hackers and scammers, rather than a deep understanding of how AI apps store or utilise their information, highlighting a critical gap in digital literacy.

"Current initiatives are not enough to protect us from AI risks."

6. Both children and stakeholders felt that **existing online safety measures and child protection frameworks are insufficient** or lack specific application to AI's unique threats. Children reported they often would not know where to report AI-related harm.

"We are worried about AI risks, but we mostly want to enjoy the benefits."

7. Despite recognising risks such as misinformation and the potential for image manipulation/deepfakes, children expressed a fundamental **desire to continue engaging with AI for its benefits**, underscoring the necessity of **system-level solutions**.

4. Discussion: Linking Participants' Perspectives to the Online Sexual Exploitation Landscape

The most striking finding is the significant disconnect between the children's concerns and the magnitude of online sexual exploitation threats. The silence, discomfort, and limited articulation of sexual exploitation should not be interpreted as low prevalence, but rather as evidence of the shame, stigma, and lack of child-friendly language surrounding these issues. The children's findings are critically linked to online sexual exploitation vulnerability through three key areas:

1 **The Conceptual Gap and Systemic Risk**
The child's view of AI as a neutral, helpful "*tool*" is at odds with the reality that generative AI could be used to harm children. Their limited conceptualisation prevents them from grasping the technical risks of mass child sexual abuse material creation. This risk is compounded by the legal vacuum and design flaws. The deployment of AI has outpaced laws, creating a legal gray area and impunity for misuse. Furthermore, design choices present dual risks: open-source design allows malicious manipulation of code, while closed-source design compromises the transparency needed for external ethical oversight, both of which increase online sexual exploitation vulnerability.

2 **Emotional Vulnerability and Amplified Threats**

The reliance on AI for emotional support creates a direct path for exploitation. The qualities children value in a chatbot (availability, non-judgment) are exactly what makes AI a powerful asset for offenders who use automation and personalisation to scale grooming and sexual extortion. This phenomenon means the child's most valued uses of the technology also become a source of their greatest risk. The children's findings on social isolation are therefore critically linked to risk of online sexual exploitation of children.

3 **The Mandate for AI-Led Solutions and Safeguards**

The children's finding that current initiatives are not enough serves as an urgent mandate for change. Experts confirm that the scale of online child sexual exploitation and abuse now requires AI solutions to augment human efforts in detection, prevention, and investigation. However, this must proceed with extreme caution, as AI detection tools risk false positives, biases against minority groups, and concerns around privacy and sensitive data handling. Therefore, frameworks must prioritise privacy-preserving approaches (e.g., client-side scanning that avoids content storage) and interventions that focus on prevention, support, and deterrence over solely focusing on reporting.

5. Conclusion

This report confirms the "*double-edged sword*" is a critical reality: the immense benefits children seek from AI are inextricably linked to the systemic risks that fuel online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The children's limited articulation of the risks is not a fault of their own, but a symptom of a system that is currently failing them.

6. Limitations of the Study

As a qualitative study based on a non-representative sample and subject to self-reporting biases, the research provides in-depth, context-specific insights that require validation through broader quantitative research.

FINAL MANDATE

The responsibility for navigating these harms does not rest with the child. The duty lies with technology companies, governments, and regulators to establish legal and ethical safeguards that ensure AI is designed to serve all users' rights and well-being, rather than being exploited to their detriment. Urgent action is needed to transition from reactive measures to a proactive, child-centric governance framework for AI.

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Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Terre des Hommes Netherlands is an international non-governmental organisation based in The Hague, Netherlands, and working globally with local partners.

Our mission is to **protect children by preventing and stopping child exploitation**, and by empowering them to make their voices count. We envision a world where **all children can flourish** free from exploitation. Our values are human-centred, playful, bold, and responsible.