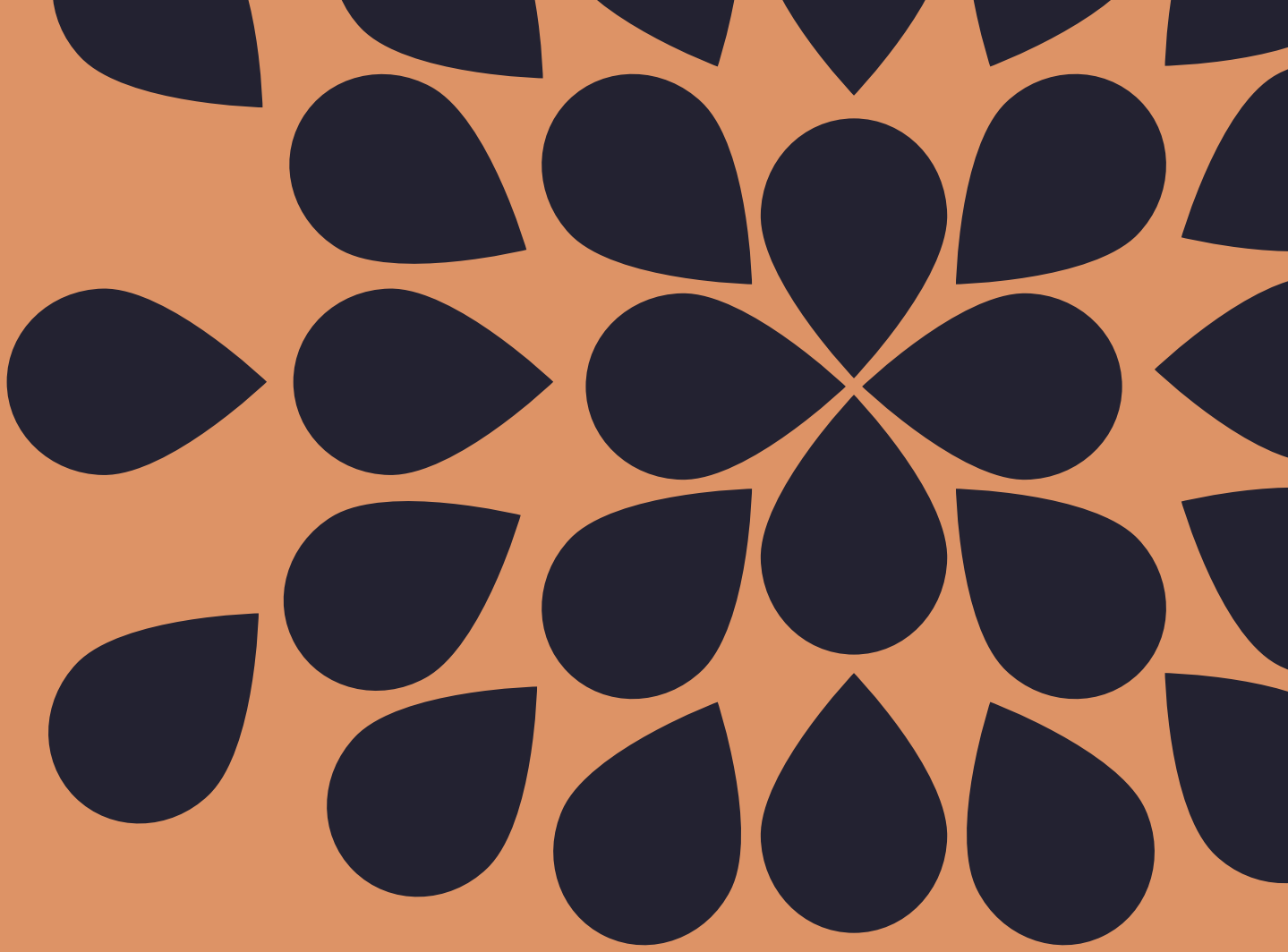
Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Supporting Parents to Prevent Online Sexual Exploitation of Vulnerable Children in the Netherlands



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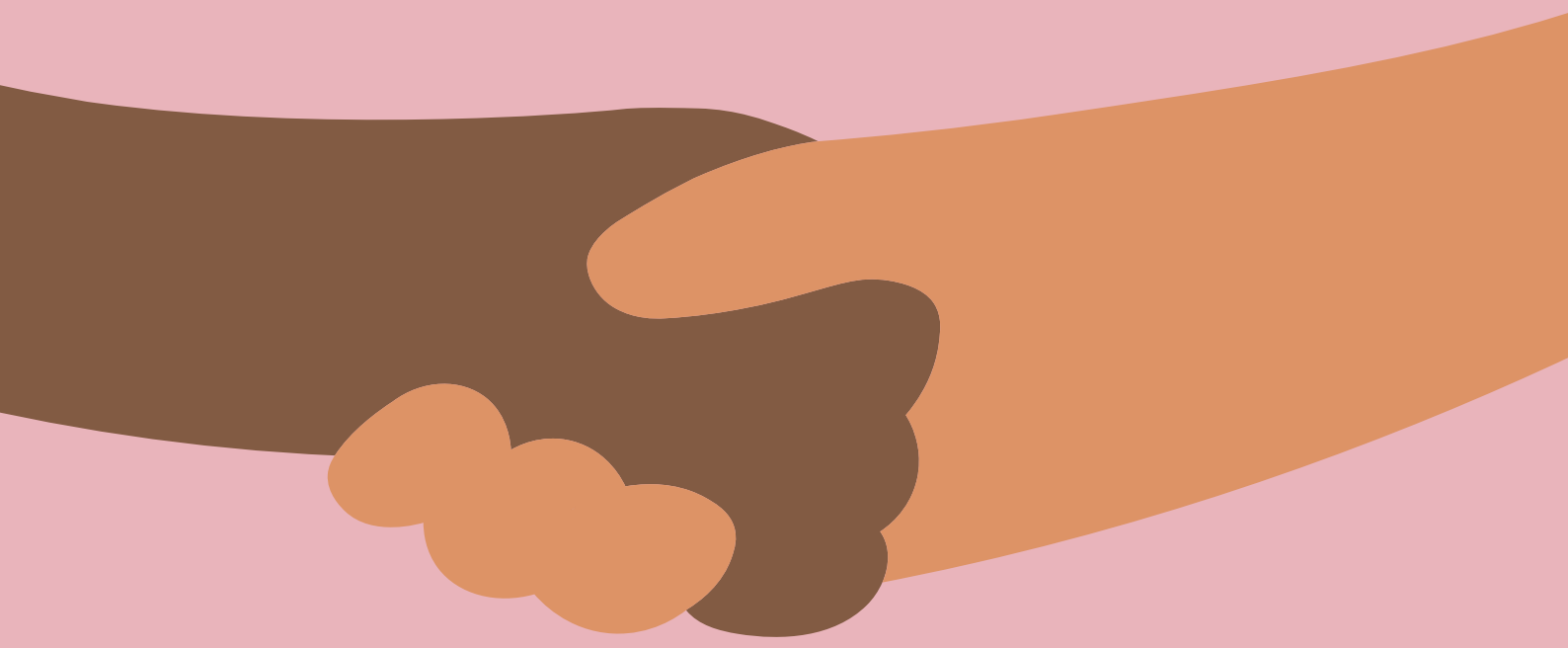
Research Team:
Eefje de Volder, PHD
Anne-Marie de Brouwer, PHD
Lia Kleuskens, MA

Research design—including inception, ethical review, and data analysis—by the research team, with input from Eva Notté, MA, Kimberley Anderson, PHD, and Zosa Gruber, PHD.

Reviewed by Zosa Gruber, PHD, and Monique Demenint, MA.
Designed by Margherita Chiarolanza.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Many parents have limited awareness of the digital threats their children may encounter, including online sexual exploitation. Furthermore, cultural taboos and discomfort around discussing sexual matters often prevent open dialogue between parents and children, diminishing a critical layer of protection against online child sexual exploitation (OCSE).

When online abuse does occur, parents often struggle to take appropriate action. A 2023 report by the Expertisecentrum Online Kindermisbruik (EOKM) shows that many parents hesitate to report such incidents due to uncertainty about proper procedures or fear of potential consequences. Additionally, they frequently lack access to institutional or community support systems that could help them navigate these complex situations (Livingstone et al., 2019).

This report investigates the **role of parents in safeguarding children from online harm**, drawing on interviews and focus groups conducted with parents in the Netherlands. It explores the strategies they employ to guide and protect their children, how they communicate about online risks, and how prepared they feel to respond to incidents of online sexual exploitation. These themes align with Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL)'s Research Agenda (2024), which emphasises context-specific risk factors, family-based protective strategies, prevailing social norms, the balance between child protection and autonomy, and the links between technology, child well-being, and OCSE risk.

The study specifically focuses on two vulnerable groups previously highlighted in a TdH NL scoping study: **parents and caregivers of children with mild cognitive impairments (MCI)** and those with **refugee backgrounds**. The central question guiding this research is:

How can parents and caregivers of children with mild cognitive impairments and refugee backgrounds in the Netherlands be better supported to recognise, report, and respond to OCSE risks?

Based on **seven focus group discussions and eight interviews with a total of 47 participants**, this study reveals that refugee parents and parents of children with MCI face significant ecological and intersectional challenges in managing their children's online safety. Their mediation strategies are deeply influenced by social, cultural, economic, and emotional factors. Refugee parents often struggle with unfamiliar technology, language barriers, and cultural differences, while parents of cognitively impaired children are overwhelmed by their children's vulnerability to online risks.

Both groups operate under **high stress** due to, for example, unstable living conditions, financial pressures, and mental health concerns, which limit their capacity to proactively engage with digital safety. As a result, they tend to rely on **restrictive or monitoring approaches** rather than open, communicative strategies, with some notable exceptions. Cultural discomfort and linguistic limitations further hinder discussions about sensitive topics such as online sexual exploitation.

Gender roles also play a role, with mothers typically assuming primary responsibility for both caregiving and digital supervision, increasing their emotional and mental load. Fathers, when present, tend to be less engaged in these conversations, leaving mothers to navigate online safety largely on their own. Although parents recognise the dangers their children face online, they often feel ill-equipped to respond effectively.

The study concludes that **effective interventions aimed at preventing online sexual exploitation must be ecologically and culturally informed**—that is, grounded in an understanding of the broader social environment and the cultural norms shaping families' daily lives. Interventions must also be linguistically responsive and tailored to the complex realities of these families, who navigate the intersection of migration, mild cognitive impairments, and increasing digitalisation. These overlapping factors shape children's exposure to online risks as well as families' ability to recognise, prevent, and respond to them.

Finally, the study offers both general insights and recommendations for engaging parents, as well as specific guidance tailored to parents of children with refugee backgrounds and those of children with MCI.

General Insights and Recommendations for TdH NL for Future Projects

1 Maximise accessibility

Extend awareness-raising campaigns beyond online platforms and ensure materials are translated into relevant languages. Use offline resources, integrate messaging into school communications, and collaborate with community leaders, youth workers, and educators. Recognise that digital literacy barriers exist, and ensure outreach is long-term and sustained.

2 Broaden the focus to general online safety

Rather than focusing solely on online sexual exploitation, address general online risks (e.g., screen time, privacy, gaming). This approach resonates more with parents, particularly those of younger children, and reduces resistance caused by fear-based messaging.

3 Use positive, empowering language

Frame messaging around “online safety” rather than “online (sexual) risks” to avoid alienating parents and encourage constructive conversations.

4 Promote open, age-appropriate dialogue

Support parents in developing the confidence and skills to discuss online behaviour and risks with their children. Information about online sexual exploitation can be introduced naturally within this broader safety conversation.

5 Make engagement mutually beneficial

Design sessions where parents both contribute and receive valuable information. Replace extractive focus groups with interactive workshops, allowing parents to learn about online safety while sharing their insights—creating a win-win dynamic.

6 Engage through existing parent groups and training

Embed the campaign within existing parental support settings to reach more families organically, particularly those in MCI communities.

Insights and Recommendations to Engage Parents of Children with Refugee Backgrounds

1 Adopt a phased, trust-based approach

Begin with trust-building sessions before introducing sensitive topics such as OCSE, particularly with groups of parents from refugee communities who may have difficulties openly discussing sexuality.

2 Use cultural facilitators

Engage facilitators from local refugee or community organisations to bridge cultural differences.

3 Ensure offline outreach

Since many refugee parents have experienced limited or restricted online access, interventions should take place in safe, familiar physical spaces such as community centres or refugee organisations.

4 Collaborate with trusted local partners

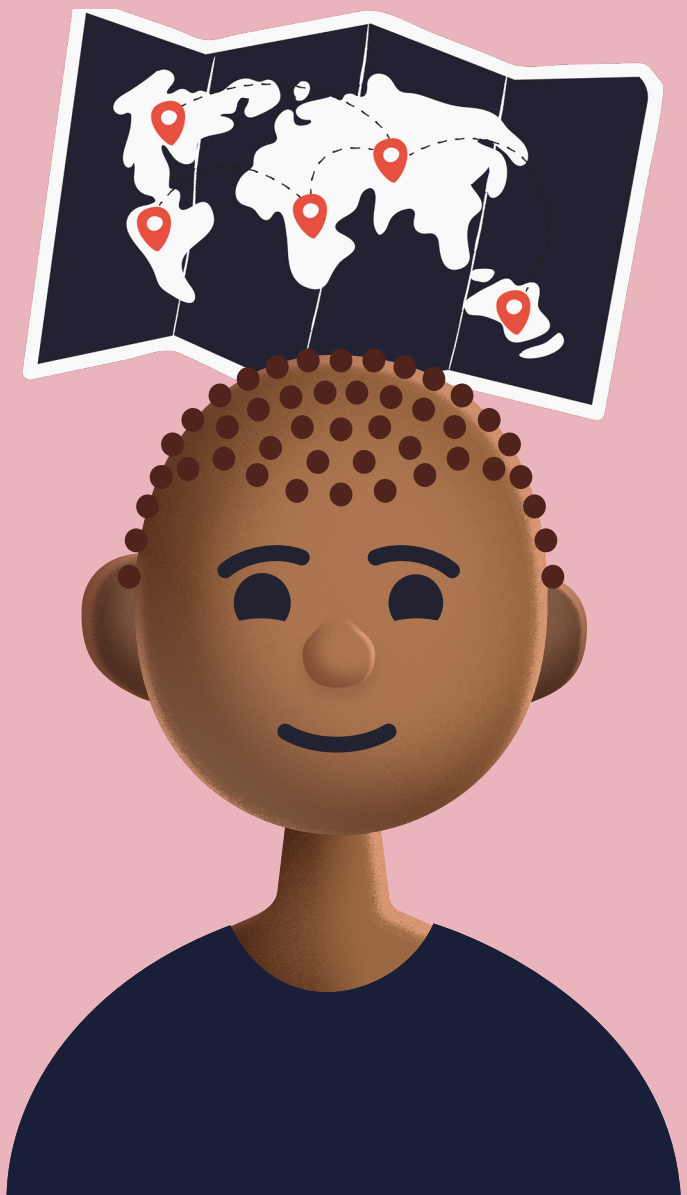
Work with community centres, refugee organisations, language/integration programmes, and digital literacy training locations to engage families.

5 Integrate OCSE into existing programmes

Embed OCSE education into ongoing parent support programmes such as "***Ouders in Positie***"[1], which already support refugee and Muslim parents.

6 Provide practical, culturally sensitive materials

Utilise clear, actionable guidance and facilitation techniques that respect cultural norms and are accessible to parents with language or literacy barriers.



1 "***Ouders in Positie***" is a Dutch parenting programme designed to strengthen and empower parents of adolescents and young adults in raising their children and protecting them from extremist influences. The programme consists of six interactive sessions that combine knowledge-sharing on adolescent development, identity formation, democratic values, and online recruitment tactics with practical skill-building exercises. Parents engage in scenario-based training with a professional actor to practice conversations from their own experiences. For more information, see: https://www.diversae.nl/copy-of-workshoptraject-wie-ben-ik.

Insights and Recommendations to Engage Parents of Children with Mild Cognitive Impairments (MCI)

1 Use inclusive, non-stigmatising language

Avoid using clinical terms, such as *"MCI"*, when engaging with parents. Instead, refer to *"vulnerable children with learning difficulties"* to reduce stigma and increase participation.

2 Acknowledge emotional and practical burdens

Parents often feel overwhelmed and may avoid engagement due to shame, fear of judgment, or emotional strain. Interventions should be low-threshold, supportive, and non-intrusive.

3 Foster trust and use one-on-one approaches

One-on-one interviews are preferred over group discussions. Trust-building takes time, especially when working through schools or institutions. Snowballing and word-of-mouth can be more effective than broad recruitment strategies.

4 Engage through existing networks

Connect with existing care, education, or support programmes rather than creating new initiatives. Teachers, supervisors, and institutions working closely with children with MCI can be valuable partners in both outreach and insight.

5 Adapt communication style

Use simple, respectful language that is accessible to all parents—recognising that some may also have cognitive challenges themselves.

6 Time engagement around concrete events

Parents respond better to discussions about online safety when triggered by real-life incidents (e.g., a viral video, news story, or specific app behaviour) rather than abstract or general conversations.

5 Allow time and flexibility

Building relationships with institutions and parents takes time and effort. Avoid restarting the process with each new research phase; instead, build long-term engagement.

6 Be sensitive to research fatigue

Some institutions decline participation due to overexposure to research or the heavy emotional toll on families, especially when exploitation has already occurred.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our sincere gratitude to **all the parents who generously shared their personal experiences** as part of this research. Their openness and willingness to contribute have been invaluable, and this study would not have been possible without their participation. Their insights will undoubtedly help inform and support other parents facing similar challenges.

We also wish to acknowledge and thank our **colleagues at Terre des Hommes Netherlands—Dr. Zosa Gruber, Dr. Kimberley Anderson, and Eva Notté**—for their valuable contributions throughout key phases of this research, including the inception, ethical review, and data analysis. Their expertise and thoughtful input greatly enriched the quality and direction of this work.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ECP	Electronic Commerce Platform Nederland
ECPAT	End Child Prostitution and Trafficking
EOKM	Expertise Agency Online Child Abuse (Expertisecentrum Online Kindermisbruik
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
INT	Interview
LvB	Licht Verstandelijk Beperkt (mild cognitive impairment)
MCI	Mild Cognitive Impairment
OCSE	Online Child Sexual Exploitation
TdH NL	Terre des Hommes Netherlands
ToT	Train of Trainers
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital world, children and adolescents spend a substantial part of their lives online. Whether it is through social media, video platforms, gaming, or messaging apps, their online presence is often intense and continuous. While this connectivity can foster learning, self-expression, and social relationships, it also exposes young people to serious risks—including cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, online grooming, and sexual exploitation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; UNICEF, 2017).

A recent study by Fonds Slachtofferhulp found that **one out of two youngsters between 12 and 25 years old has had an experience with online sexual assault or intimidation** (Fonds Slachtofferhulp, 2025). As a result, online safety has become a central concern for parents and caregivers worldwide.

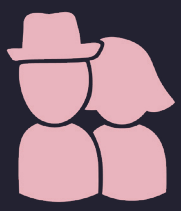
An international survey by ECPAT International (2024) found that **55% of parents ranked online safety as their top concern**, surpassing fears related to mental and physical health. In the Netherlands, similar patterns emerge. According to Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL) (2023), **59% of Dutch parents** with children aged 8 to 18 **are concerned about their child's digital safety**, particularly regarding fake accounts, impersonation, and strangers contacting their children online.

Despite these concerns, there is often a significant gap between what parents believe their children do online and their children's actual digital behaviour. Research shows that many children actively conceal their online activities by minimising browsers or deleting search histories, while parents assume their children are not visiting inappropriate websites (Liu et al. 2023). As children grow older, parents tend to reduce their oversight, even though concerns about digital privacy and platform safety increase (ICT Magazine, 2021).

According to a study by *ECP | Platform voor de Informatie Samenleving* (2020), many parents have limited awareness of the digital threats their children may face, including online sexual exploitation. **Only 21% of parents realise their child could potentially be exposed** to such risks. This lack of awareness hinders early recognition and effective response. Moreover, taboos and discomfort around discussing sexual topics often prevent open conversations between parents and children, reducing the protective buffer against online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) (Livingstone et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2021).

1 out of 2 youngsters

between 12 and 25 has had an experience with **online sexual assault or intimidation**.



55% of parents

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27+ million incidents of OCSE

in 2022 alone, a **35% increase** from the previous year.

The problem extends further: **parents often struggle to respond when online abuse does occur**. A 2023 report by the *Expertisecentrum Online Kindermisbruik (EOKM)* reveals that parents frequently hesitate to report online abuse due to a lack of knowledge about the proper steps or fear of consequences. Many also lack access to institutional or community-based support, which could help them manage such complex situations (Livingstone et al., 2019).

This report explores the role of parents in safeguarding children from online harm, drawing on interviews and focus groups conducted with parents in the Netherlands. We examine the strategies parents use to guide and support their children, the ways they communicate about online risks, and their preparedness to respond to situations of online sexual exploitation. Through these insights, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges parents face and the resources they may need to become effective allies in their children's digital lives.

This research forms part of one of TdH NL's key thematic programmes, which aims to catalyse systemic change to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation of children. A particular focus is on **OCSE**, defined as:

"***All acts of a sexually exploitative nature carried out against a child that have, at some stage, a connection to the online environment. It includes any use of ICT that results in sexual exploitation or causes a child to be sexually exploited, or that results in or causes images or other material documenting such sexual exploitation to be produced, bought, sold, possessed, distributed, or transmitted.***"

(ECPAT International 2016, Luxemburg Guidelines)

The definition of OCSE by ECPAT International highlights the **complex and multifaceted nature of these crimes**, which involve not only the direct abuse of children but also the creation, distribution, and consumption of exploitative materials via digital technologies. Understanding this broad scope is crucial to grasping the scale and urgency of the issue.

Globally, OCSE is a rapidly escalating threat to child safety, driven by increased internet access and the anonymity afforded by digital platforms. Reports indicate a significant surge in cases worldwide, with **over 27 million incidents of online child sexual abuse recorded in 2022 alone—a 35% increase compared to the previous year** (European Commission, 2023). In the Netherlands, this trend is reflected in a sharp rise in reports of online grooming and exploitation, affecting one in five young people in 2023 (Thorn, 2023). This alarming development underscores the pressing need for targeted prevention and response strategies specifically tailored to the Dutch context.

Recognising this urgency, TdH NL is dedicating efforts to develop a **programme aimed at preventing OCSE by empowering parents and caregivers**. This research will provide a crucial evidence base to enhance the understanding of parental knowledge, attitudes, and practices concerning OCSE risks, thereby informing the design of effective awareness campaigns and support mechanisms.

Earlier, a TdH NL scoping research (March 2024) identified **children with mild cognitive impairments (MCI) and those with refugee backgrounds** as particularly vulnerable to OCSE. Parents of these groups are the focus of this study. Children with MCI face heightened risks due to difficulties in communication, understanding social cues, and navigating digital environments. Victimisation among this group can be more severe and recurrent, occurring up to three times more frequently than in the general population (Koraal, CoMensha & Meta Story Institute, 2023). The Dutch Knowledge Center for Intellectual Impairments (Kenniscentrum LVB) defines intellectual impairment ("*Licht Verstandelijke*

Beperking" or "*LvB*") by:

- Limited intellectual functioning (IQ between 50 and 85)
- Limitations in adaptive skills (daily communication, independent living, social interactions)
- Onset before age 18

These impairments affect children's capacity to recognise risks and protect themselves online, making them easier targets. Additionally, parents may lack awareness or resources to provide tailored digital safety education, particularly if children no longer live at home or if socioeconomic challenges limit their support (van den Belt & Vollebregt, 2024).

Children with refugee backgrounds face distinct vulnerabilities linked to social isolation, psychosocial burdens on parents and caregivers, and digital divides:

1. **Seeking social connection**: Refugee children may turn to online spaces to find a sense of belonging and friendship due to cultural and language barriers, as well as limited physical social opportunities (Lenette, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). This increases their exposure to potential groomers.
2. **Psychosocial burden on parents**: Refugee parents often manage trauma, integration challenges, and uncertainty, reducing their capacity to monitor children's online activity effectively (UNICEF, 2020; 'Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving', 2022).
3. **Digital gap**: Limited digital literacy, access, and language skills hinder parents' ability to supervise and understand online risks (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2021).

1.1 Research Questions

How can parents and caregivers of children with mild cognitive impairments and refugee backgrounds in the Netherlands be better supported to recognise, report, and respond to OCSE risks?

Sub-questions:

- **What is the current level of knowledge among parents and caregivers about OCSE and its risks?**
- **How do they communicate with children about online safety, and what protective measures do they implement?**
- **What are their responses if they suspect a child is affected by OCSE?**
- **What support or information do they require to improve protection?**

These questions align with TdH NL's *Research Agenda* (2024), focusing on context-specific predictors, family support strategies, social norms influencing protection, the balance between protection and agency, and the interaction between technology, well-being, and OCSE risks.

1.2 Research Framework

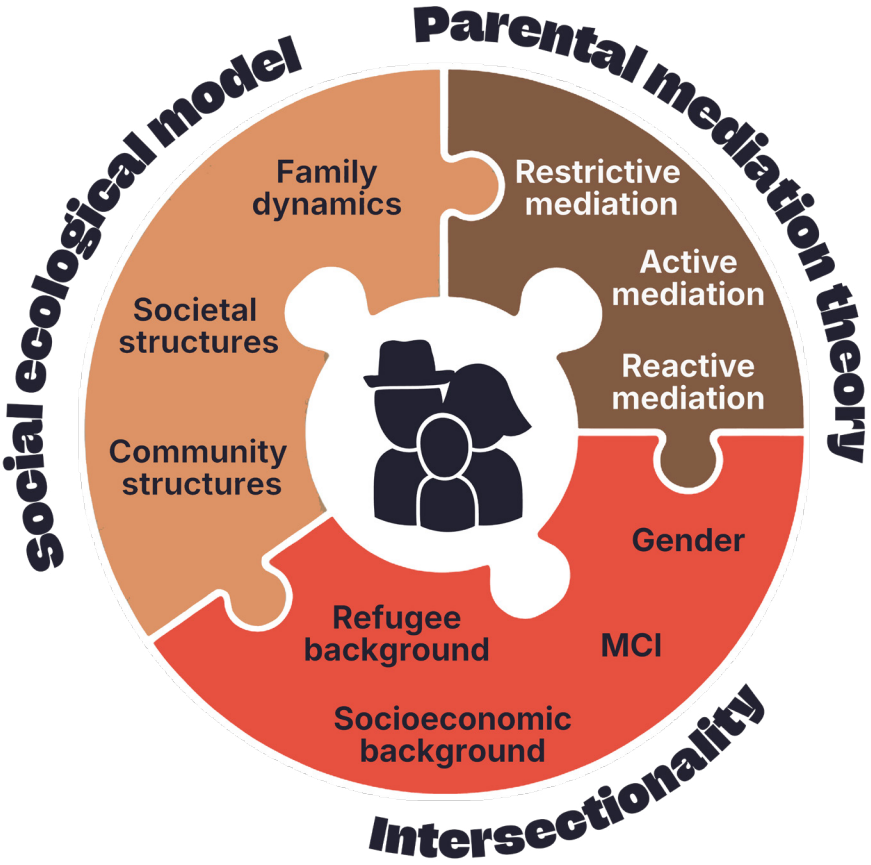
This research draws upon an integrated analytical framework that combines parental mediation theory, intersectionality, and the social ecological model to provide a comprehensive understanding of the roles and challenges that parents face in protecting their children online.

Parental mediation theory offers insight into how parents engage with their children's digital activities, identifying different approaches such as restrictive mediation, where parents set clear boundaries; active mediation, involving open discussions about online risks; and reactive mediation, which refers to responses after an incident occurs (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

At the same time, **intersectionality** emphasises that parents' experiences and challenges are shaped by the interplay of multiple social identities, including gender, having a mild mental impairment, socioeconomic status, and migration background. These social identities also overlap with the at-risk factors identified during the scoping study preceding this research, suggesting that belonging to one or more of these social identity categories increases vulnerability to online sexual exploitation (van den Belt & Vollebregt, 2024). This perspective is especially relevant when considering refugee parents and parents of children with MCI, whose unique positions influence how they perceive online risks and access resources for protection (Crenshaw, 1989).

Complementing these perspectives, **the social ecological model** broadens the analysis by situating parental mediation and reporting behaviours within multiple layers of influence, ranging from immediate family dynamics to broader societal and cultural structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within these layers, factors such as stigma and cultural norms can create barriers that hinder parents from reporting concerns or seeking help.

Together, these theoretical lenses enable a holistic exploration of the complex environment shaping parental protection against online sexual exploitation.



1.3 Methodology

To explore parents' knowledge, awareness, and skills in protecting their children from online sexual exploitation, this study adopted a qualitative approach to collect primary data from parents and caregivers. The research specifically focused on parents of children with MCI or of a refugee background.

1.3.1 Literature Review

The literature review drew on various databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, and grey literature sources. Key search terms used included: "*online safety children*", "*protection of children*", and "p*arents protection online risks children*".

The sources identified through these searches were assessed using the following criteria:

- **Relevance** to the scope and topic of the research
- **Geographical focus** on the Netherlands
- **Publication date**, with a cut-off point at 2016 to ensure the information was current and up-to-date
- **Credibility**, based on a pre-established checklist

A wide range of sources was considered, including peer-reviewed journal articles, grey literature, government publications, and policy reports. After filtering by date, titles (and abstracts, where available) were reviewed to determine their relevance to the research scope and their applicability to the research questions. Sources that met these initial criteria were then analysed in greater detail, with a focus on relevance and credibility.

All sources that aligned with the research criteria were compiled in a literature review tool, which was used to extract essential information and identify key themes for further analysis.

1.4 Data Collection

1.4.1 Sampling

Participants were recruited through existing networks, including local organisations, community initiatives, and individual contacts. This approach enabled the research team to gradually build trust with the target groups. Parents with a refugee background were particularly open to participating. Many expressed that, although they were not familiar with the topic, they were eager to learn more and contribute to the research. We aimed for an equal distribution of fathers and mothers.

In contrast, recruiting parents of children with MCI proved more challenging. Both individual parents and organisations were often hesitant or unwilling to collaborate. This reluctance appeared to stem from stigma—for example, the use of the term "*MCI*", which many parents preferred to avoid, or the possibility that their children had not yet been formally diagnosed—along with a sense of being scrutinised and the high levels of stress these parents experience in their daily life. These themes were also evident in the interviews with the parents who were willing to participate. Additionally, an organisation that had previously worked with TdH NL (and the researchers) declined to participate, citing that the parents had been overburdened by research requests in the past period. As a result, the participant distribution between the two groups was uneven. As all participants in the study were parents (rather than other types of caregivers), the term "*parents*" will be used throughout the report for clarity and readability. However, the insights and recommendations presented are equally relevant and applicable to caregivers in similar roles.

1.4.2 Focus Group Discussions

The research team organised focus group discussions in collaboration with organisations that closely supported the target populations, such as refugee support services and care organisations. In total, seven focus groups were conducted with 39 participants. Each session lasted a maximum of 1.5 hours and was followed by a semi-structured discussion guide, developed in advance.

The focus groups explored three main themes:

1 Knowledge of OCSE

Parents were asked what they already knew about OCSE, how they believed children could be at risk, and whether they thought certain groups of children might be more vulnerable than others.

2 Parenting approaches to internet safety

This part of the discussion explored how parents address online safety concerns with their children, providing insight into their parenting styles, the communication strategies they use or avoid, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of these strategies.

3 Response to a hypothetical case study

The session concluded with a case scenario in which parents were asked to imagine that their child had become a victim of OCSE. They reflected on how they would respond, whether they would know where to seek help, and what actions they might take to address the situation.

These discussions offered valuable insights into parental awareness, attitudes, and needs regarding the prevention and response to online sexual exploitation.

1.4.3 Individual Interviews

Some parents preferred individual interviews over group discussions. In many cases, this was due to the sensitive nature of the topic; parents felt more comfortable speaking privately. In other cases, practical constraints, such as time availability and language spoken, made one-on-one interviews more feasible. In total, eight individual interviews were held. These followed the same interview guide as that used in the focus groups.

1.4.4 Descriptive Overview of the Sample

The total sample consisted of **47 participants, including two parents of children with MCI, 43 parents with a refugee background**, and **two participants who belonged to both target groups**—parents of children with MCI and of a refugee background. Participants' **ages ranged from 32 to 62 years**. They represented **11 different nationalities**: Dutch, Lesotho, Ukraine, Eritrea, Iraq, Turkey, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Libya. Twenty-eight mothers and 19 fathers were among the interviewees. The ages of their **children ranged from 4 to 18 years**. In total, participants reported having **42 sons** and **51 daughters**.

Additional demographic characteristics are summarised in the table below. These demographics are included to support the identification and contextual understanding of at-risk groups, as previously outlined by Van den Belt and Vollebregt (2024) in their scoping study for TdH NL.

47 Total Participants

Table 1: Overview of Participant Demographics

Categories	Descriptions / Values
Total participants	47
Age range (years)	32–62
Gender	28 mothers, 19 fathers
Migration background	Participants from 11 nationalities: Dutch, Lesotho, Ukraine, Eritrea, Iraq, Turkey, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, DRC, Libya
Participation form	Three individual interviews, eight focus groups with a total of 47 participants
Target groups	Two with children with MCI, 43 refugee background, two both
Number of children (total)	93 (42 sons, 51 daughters)
Children's age range (years)	4-18

1.4.5 Data Analysis

All data from the focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, provided the participants consented. When consent was not given, detailed notes were taken. The research team transcribed both the focus group discussions and the interviews. All transcriptions were anonymised to ensure that no identifiable information remained, and only pseudonymised data were included.

The analysis of the interviews and focus groups was conducted using **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process followed an inductive and intersectional approach, identifying themes and patterns grounded in the data, while critically examining how multiple dimensions of identity and structural inequality—such as gender, migration background, socio-economic status, and mild cognitive impairment—intersected and shaped parents' experiences in managing OCSE.

The thematic analysis was carried out in six iterative phases:

- Familiarisation with the data
- Generation of initial codes
- Generation of themes
- Review of themes
- Definition and naming of themes
- Production of the report

While the steps are presented sequentially, the analysis was a dynamic and flexible process. As new insights emerged, the coding and thematisation were adjusted accordingly.

Intersectionality was applied throughout the analysis, not as a separate step but as an analytical lens that informed coding, theme development, and interpretation. Particular attention was given to how overlapping vulnerabilities (e.g., being a single parent with a migration background and a child with MCI) influenced parental mediation practices and access to support.

All qualitative data were managed in ATLAS.ti web, a secure qualitative data analysis platform compliant with GDPR. Only pseudonymised data was uploaded. In the event of any data protection or security incidents, ATLAS.ti adheres to strict protocols as outlined in its Data Processing Agreement (2020).

The research team employed a structured codebook, based on the research questions, theoretical framework (including the social-ecological model and parental mediation

theory), and relevant literature. Additional codes were created inductively to capture emerging and intersectional themes from the data. The final report was organised around these themes and enriched with participant quotes and relevant creative outputs, highlighting both shared experiences and the influence of intersecting identities.

1.4.6 Ethical Considerations and Data Management

This research adheres to the safeguarding principles of TdH NL and the integrity protocol of IMPACT, applying a strict **"*do no harm*" approach**. Although children were not directly involved in the study, a safeguarding risk assessment was conducted and attached to the research protocol. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent, without the provision of gifts to ensure unbiased participation. Any participation-related costs were reimbursed.

Informed consent was obtained through signed forms, which were digitised and securely stored. Participants were fully informed of their rights and allowed to ask questions. Confidentiality and data protection were ensured throughout, in compliance with GDPR (2018). All transcripts were pseudonymised, and quotations in the final report were attributed only using non-identifiable markers (e.g., gender, child's risk group, age group).

Audio recordings were made only with consent and introductions to avoid capturing identifiable information. Data were processed and stored using secure systems (e.g., encrypted hard drives, two-factor authentication, and access control). Personal data was deleted by 30th May 2025, and anonymised data will be retained for up to ten years for research and advocacy purposes only. Reuse of data beyond this period will require ethical review.

1.4.7 Limitations

A critical limitation of this research is the limited number of participants from the subgroup of parents whose children have a mild cognitive impairment. Although their perspectives offer valuable insights, the small sample size makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about this group as a whole. This limitation is, however, also revealing: the difficulty in reaching these parents underscores the stigmatisation and marginalisation surrounding intellectual impairment. The underrepresentation itself highlights the need for greater attention to stigma and accessibility in future research and interventions. Despite the small number, the findings do offer preliminary direction and highlight the importance of including this group more intentionally in future studies.

Another limitation of this research is the use of a translator during some of the interviews. While translation made it possible to include parents who are not yet fluent in Dutch or English, it also introduced potential challenges. Nuances may have been lost or slightly altered in the translation process, potentially affecting the accuracy and depth of the data collected. Moreover, the presence of a third person may have influenced participants' willingness to speak openly about sensitive topics. Although efforts were made to brief the translator thoroughly and create a safe and respectful environment, these dynamics should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

2

KEY FINDINGS

2.1 What Do Parents Know About Online Risks for Children?

2.1.1 Knowledge and Awareness

When asked to describe online risks for children, several parents referred to risks beyond sexual exploitation. These included peer pressure, such as participation in social media challenges, and online bullying. One mother stated:

> ***"And they [children on social media channels] do have different kinds of challenges. They are asking children to do some activities. For example, take a photo of your mother or your sister in the toilet, in the bathroom, in your bathroom, and you could share that. That's a challenge. For example, these kinds of challenges, they can ask children to do."***
> - FGD1-P3[2]

Another mother also mentioned these challenges:

> ***"Then I'm talking more about the group setting, actually. I think that's harmful, so that you can push each other to go and do certain things. So one person has seen something on social media, for example, those challenges that were going around online, by choking yourself and then getting out of it."***
> - INT-P34[3]

Parents also expressed concern about children being asked to provide their parents' bank details in exchange for in-game advantages, a form of online fraud. Additionally, they mentioned violent games and their potential influence on children's behaviour. Some parents focused on the health risks associated with excessive time spent online, such as the potential impact on eyesight, as one mother noted, referring to an article she had read. Other risks cited included extortion or being coerced into committing (criminal) acts with the promise of high rewards.

Some parents with a refugee background had limited online experience themselves, which consequently impacted their knowledge and awareness of online risks for children.

2 Mother with a refugee background, 35 years old.
3 Mother from the Netherlands, 52 years old.

> ***"I don't know anything about what happens online. I only use it if I want to learn something about language, like on YouTube. My children also don't know anything, because when we were in our country, we never had a phone. Well, they didn't know what was happening until now. They knew nothing about phones."***
> - FGD6–P26[4]

In general, parents with refugee backgrounds seem to struggle to conceptualise online sexual exploitation of children. However, differences can be observed between refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries (who face more difficulties) and those from Ukraine (who are able to provide more accurate examples).

Many of the parents of the first group had no understanding of the term "*online sexual exploitation*" at the start of the conversation: "*I don't know what that means. I never heard of it*" (FG3-P10)[5]. When asked about it, many referred to concerns about children playing games or using the internet and encountering explicit content, such as pornography, without actively seeking it out.

> ***"For example, when my son is playing online, like games, he sees a lot of 18+ advertisements. He sees that very often, but he's actually far too young for that. I find it really important that he doesn't see that too much. That's why we monitor his tablet and phone."***
> - FGD3-P13[6]

However, a few parents with refugee backgrounds were able to provide a more accurate definition of online sexual exploitation. These were generally highly educated parents, many of whom had completed university—level studies in their countries of origin. No differences were observed between mothers and fathers. These parents described situations in which a child meets someone online who pretends to be their age but is in fact much older. Over time, the child develops a trusting relationship with the individual, who then asks for explicit images, sometimes using them to blackmail the child into sending more. A father described:

> ***"The first thing I think of is photos. I believe it starts with someone approaching the child as a friend, a peer, gaining their trust by first asking for normal photos. Then, they ask for sexual or nude pictures, and eventually for personal details, like their address, so they can blackmail and abuse the child. That's what comes to mind."***
> - FGD4-P16[7]

The parents who offered this definition were typically those proactive in researching the issue, often seeking information through digital platforms that provide advice and guidance on how to prevent such exploitation.

Interestingly, risks of encountering someone with harmful intentions in online games were far less recognised by parents than similar risks on social media platforms. For example, when children played games such as Roblox, this was often described by parents as a period during which the child was not yet exposed to significant online challenges.

4 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.
5 Mother with a refugee background, 50 years old.
6 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.
7 Father with a refugee background, 39 years old.

> ***"For me, actually, my kids are not at the age where they're contacting others [children's ages 7 and 8]. For example, they don't have Facebook. My son just plays one game where others play with him, Roblox, but he's not at that age yet... Maybe in the future, I'll need to hear these kinds of experiences to protect him from strangers."***
> - FGD4-P12[8]

This quote highlights another important point: many parents only begin to consider online risks once their children reach puberty. However, the literature shows that **children may already encounter online risks, including risks of sexual exploitation, from as young as six or seven years old** (UNICEF, 2020).

Many parents with a refugee background shared that they first learnt about the concept of online sexual exploitation of children during the interview or focus group. They were unaware that their children could come into contact with other children or adults online. Additionally, they had minimal knowledge of the digital world in general, which made it difficult for them to grasp the associated risks and dangers. This lack of awareness was especially pronounced among participants from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Several parents in these groups explained that they had minimal exposure to digital devices or online platforms before coming to the Netherlands and felt particularly anxious about their children's online activities. One mother noted that issues such as online sexual exploitation only emerged in her life after migrating to the Netherlands.

> ***"In Europe it is more difficult to keep track of all the developments. Developments go very fast. In Africa, we did not have so much internet or phones, and we didn't have to think about this online sexual exploitation of children. They were playing outside. Only in the Netherlands we have to think about it."***
> - INT-P9[9]

Some parents were even unaware that their children could meet people online whom they did not know, let alone individuals who might pose a risk. For this group, the focus group discussions introduced a level of anxiety they had not previously experienced.

> ***"I don't understand. What do you mean with meeting people online? I don't understand how my child would be able to meet someone online. Can you please understand? I did not know about this."***
> - FGD7-P32[10]

This can be explained by what the literature refers to as "***the digital divide***", which highlights not only unequal access to digital resources but also disparities in digital literacy (European Commission, 2024; UNESCO, n.d.). Children tend to adapt quickly to digital technologies and platforms, often outpacing their parents in familiarity with new digital environments. As a

8 Mother with a refugee background, 32 years old.
9 Mother with a refugee background, 36 years old.
10 Father with a refugee background, 43 years old.

result, children may be exposed to online risks—including online sexual exploitation—while their parents remain unaware of these dangers or lack the skills to protect them effectively.

Parents, particularly those from refugee communities, lower socio-economic backgrounds, or with lower levels of education, often have limited awareness of online sexual exploitation and its associated risks. They may face additional obstacles in keeping up with digital developments, such as restricted access to digital tools, low levels of digital literacy, and language barriers. These challenges can hinder their ability to recognise signs of online harm (UNICEF, 2017). Refugee parents, in particular, may be less familiar with the digital world than their children, making it more challenging to effectively monitor and guide their children's online activities.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many digitally illiterate parents come from countries where internet use is closely monitored and controlled by the government, and where sexually explicit content is blocked or pushed to less mainstream parts of the internet. In the Netherlands, however, they must adopt a proactive role, which the government previously fulfilled —now in relation to content that is generally not openly discussed, especially between parents and children. This concern was primarily raised by fathers from Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq, Syria, and Palestine.

> ***"Back home, the internet is not open. A lot is blocked where we come from, but here it's open to everyone."***
> - FGD7-P45[11]

The fathers mainly referred to sexually explicit content that is restricted or unavailable in their countries of origin but accessible in the Netherlands. However, when the discussion shifted towards online sexual exploitation, they consistently emphasised the role of the government in addressing these issues.

Parents of children with mild cognitive impairments (MCI) generally demonstrated a better understanding of online sexual risks for children, although their examples often involved behaviours that would be classified as sexual abuse.

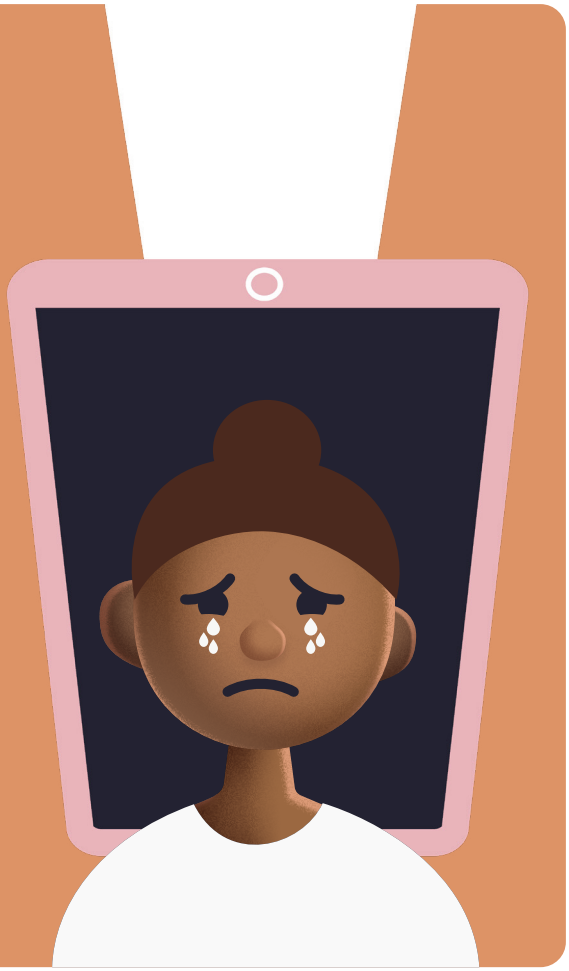
According to Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL, n.d.),

ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE

refers to non-commercial forms of sexually harmful behaviour conducted through digital platforms, such as grooming, sextortion, livestreaming of abuse, and the non-consensual sharing of sexual content involving minors.
(TdH NL, n.d.)

11 Father with a refugee background, 55 years old.

> ***"My daughter once said to me, 'Mom, look at this video,' and I was really shocked. There was a girl from her school, or maybe even her class, I'm not sure. Well, she had filmed herself down there [points to vagina] and sent it to her boyfriend, and he forwarded it. And they had also received it. So I said, 'Yes, but is that really her?' And she said, 'Yes, it really is.' And I said, 'This is not normal. This is really... I feel so sorry for her.' And then Julia said, 'But she did it herself, right? She shouldn't have filmed that, and shouldn't have sent it to her boyfriend.' And on the one hand I think, oh yes, very good, that she thinks like that. But on the other hand: yes, but you don't know what happened, what played out there. So in that way I try to make her aware of it too, like, I'm happy that you think like that, but hold on to that. And whatever happens, even when you get a boyfriend, and that boy says, 'Oh, come on, I want a picture of you'. What will you do then? Because you're in love."***
> - INT-P34[12]



This quote illustrates the mother's ambivalent response to a story her daughter shared about a classmate whose intimate video was circulated. On the one hand, the mother was reassured that her daughter appeared to understand the risks of sharing such images. On the other hand, she questioned the quickness of her daughter's judgment and gently prompted her to consider the emotional and relational dynamics involved, such as trust, peer pressure, and how being in love can make someone more likely to take risks they might not otherwise take. This moment reflects the delicate balancing act many parents face: encouraging critical thinking and personal boundaries, while also fostering empathy and awareness of how harm can occur even within seemingly safe relationships.

2.1.2 Attitudes and Beliefs

Parents in the study frequently expressed concerns about the **negative effects of social media and their children's online activities**, describing these as "*problematic*" (FGD6-P27[13]), "*addictive*" (FGD5-P18[14]), or "*dangerous*" (FGD2-P6[15]; FGD2-P5[16], P24[17]). These reflections echo wider societal discussions about children's engagement with digital platforms.

Overall, attitudes and concerns about the online environment were broadly similar across target groups. Both parents of children with refugee backgrounds and parents of children with MCI expressed similar worries about online risks

12 Mother with a refugee background, 52 years old.
13 Mother with a refugee background, 46 years old.
14 Mother with a refugee background, 38 years old.
15 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.
16 Mother with a refugee background, 33 years old.
17 Mother with a refugee background, 38 years old.

and how best to address them. However, some differences emerged in emphasis and context. Parents of children with refugee backgrounds often described additional concerns linked to cultural differences, language barriers, and limited access to information. In contrast, parents of children with MCI tended to focus more on practical guidance and understanding online content, reflecting the specific learning and developmental needs of their children. The following chapter will explore these differences in more detail.

Several participants noted a **strong societal expectation for children to be active online**, pointing out that even schools rely heavily on digital environments. As one parent observed: "*Society has decided that children must be active online. Different platforms, social media accounts. A child feels excluded if they don't participate. Society forces children to be online*" (FGD5-P19[18]). This highlights how social pressure can influence children to engage in online activities.

Some parents perceived **boys to be at lower risk of online dangers compared to girls**. However, when explicitly asked, many parents emphasised that the risks were similar for all children, regardless of gender. They tended to believe that boys encountered different types of risks, but that the overall level of risk was comparable. Parents often considered girls to be more vulnerable to online sexual exploitation, while boys were more frequently associated with extortion and criminal exploitation. Several parents also felt that the consequences of online dangers were more severe and long-lasting for girls than for boys, due to gender norms and perceived societal expectations (INT P47[19]). As a result of these perceived higher stakes, parents reported focusing more on protecting their daughters:

> ***"In our culture, if a girl gets a bad reputation, she will never marry. If a girl has a photo on social media, her reputation is ruined.... I have a daughter, and the rest are my sons. They all use the internet, but I pay more attention to my daughter. I talk to her a lot about being careful with her phone. If something comes up, she must be cautious. She is a girl, so she needs to be extra careful. To help prevent problems, I always have her help me in the kitchen. We do fun things together like drawing, sometimes we play music and dance just the two of us—we do everything together. I want her to always stay close to me, so I can keep an eye on her and protect her from doing anything wrong."***
> - FGD6-P26[20]

This illustrates how deeply concerns about girls' reputations shape parental protective behaviours, particularly within cultural contexts where honour and social standing are closely linked to female conduct.

Despite perceiving online risks as equally present for both boys and girls, several parents realised during deeper conversations that, in practice, they often discuss online safety primarily or exclusively with their daughters. For instance, one mother, initially convinced that boys and girls face equal risks, was surprised during the interview to realise she had only spoken with her daughter about online safety and not her son (FGD2). When asked why she

18 Mother with a refugee background, 42 years old.
19 Mother from the Netherlands, 44 years old.
20 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.

only talked to her daughter, she acknowledged that she did not know, as she believes both boys and girls are equally at risk. She suggested it might have been related to an unconscious bias and expressed her intention to have the same important conversation with her son as soon as she returned home. This indicates that unconscious biases may influence how parents approach protecting their children online.

A mother from the refugee target group explained that she only spoke with her daughter because "*Boys can do whatever they like online*" (FGD6-P26[21]). She further elaborated that, culturally, the consequences for a boy sending explicit images or meeting someone online are perceived as less severe than for a girl in the same situation. Regarding girls, she stated:

> ***"Because in our culture, if a girl gets a bad reputation, she will never get married. If a girl has a photo on social media, her reputation is ruined."***
> - FGD6–P26[22]

When informed that boys can also be victims of sexual exploitation, she responded with surprise, indicating a lack of awareness that boys face similar risks.

These findings suggest that **gender norms and cultural assumptions may shape parental protective behaviours**, potentially leading to unequal attention to online safety for boys and girls. Overall, mothers reported being the primary caregivers in their households and having these conversations with both their sons and daughters. In some cases, fathers were the ones having discussions with their sons. Among families with children with MCI, no clear patterns were observed with regard to the gendered nature of these conversations. Despite these differences, parents consistently emphasised the importance of openly discussing online safety across interviews and focus groups. They expressed a strong desire for more information and support to effectively safeguard all their children in the digital environment, and more generally, to learn how to discuss these issues with their children.

2.1.3 Confidence

Parents consistently expressed feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about how to protect their children in the online world. Many turned to the researcher conducting the interviews or focus groups, openly asking for advice. This revealed a widespread lack of knowledge about online risks and uncertainty about where to begin—findings that align with existing literature. They often felt powerless, particularly because their children tended to be more digitally literate, which could be intimidating.

> ***"In Eritrea we had almost no internet. We are really far behind when it comes to these things. But here, my children learn so fast — they know everything about phones, social media, even things I've never heard of. Sometimes it feels like they are the teachers and I'm the student. It makes me feel powerless, because how can I protect them in a world I don't understand?"***
> - FGD7-P31[23]

21 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.
22 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.
23 Mother with a refugee background, 41 years old.

A common dilemma for parents is balancing their desire for their children to belong socially and explore the internet with their own limited tools or confidence to guide them safely. One mother captured this struggle well:

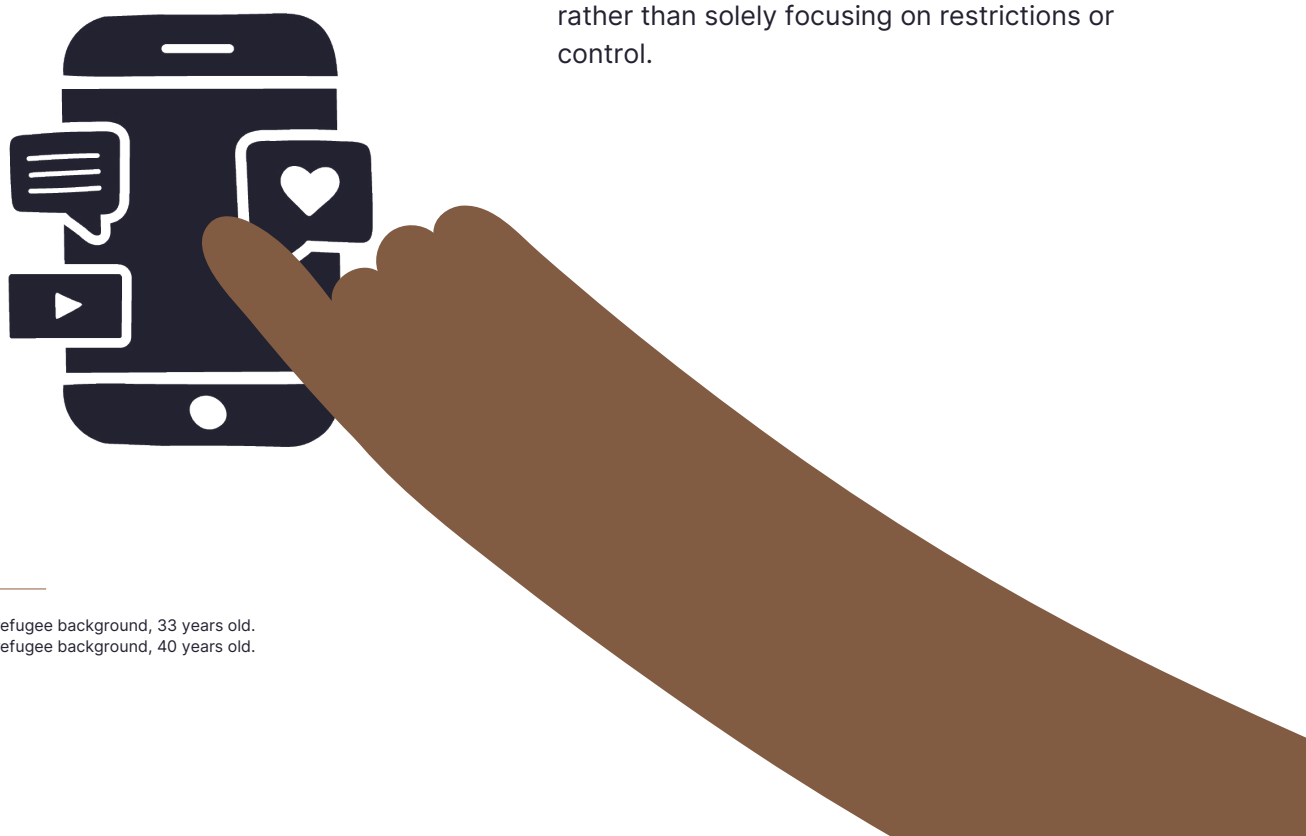
> ***"Technology is developing so quickly, and while we try to protect our children by keeping them away from the online world, we simply can't. They need to know and understand this world. It's a big dilemma for me—how do I introduce her to the online world safely? Honestly, I'm still trying to figure this out."***
> - FGD2-P5[24]

However, not all parents perceive the online world solely as a source of risk. Several participants shared examples of how **digital platforms provided vital support during difficult times.** One mother, for instance, spoke positively about her daughter's use of online games and platforms to stay connected while adjusting to life in the Netherlands after experiencing both displacement and family separation:

> ***"Roblox is popular, and while I'm not fully critical, the key is balancing screen time with other activities. Back in Ukraine, my daughter had many offline activities and native speakers, so online risks were less. Here in the Netherlands, she initially struggled to connect with Dutch children, so online platforms helped her feel freer and supported. It's complicated for me to take that away from her."***
> - FGD6-P25[24]

These experiences illustrate the complexity of the issue. The online world is not solely a source of risks—it can also provide connection, community, and resilience, particularly for children in vulnerable or transitional situations. What parents often find most daunting is not the internet itself, but its borderless nature and the sense of limited control or oversight.

Together, these findings underscore the importance of providing **accessible, culturally sensitive support that empowers parents** to engage more confidently with their children's online lives. This includes equipping them with the tools to understand the digital environment and fostering dialogue and joint exploration, rather than solely focusing on restrictions or control.



24 Mother with a refugee background, 33 years old.
25 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.

2.2 How Do Parents Try to Keep Their Children Safe Online and Discuss This With Them?

2.2.1 Managing Online Safety

Parents vary considerably in how they approach conversations about online safety with their children. Those with a refugee background who have little to no awareness of the digital world or the concept of online sexual exploitation often do not engage in these discussions at all, simply because they are unaware that their children might be at risk. This lack of knowledge frequently translates into a lack of action.

Some parents postpone these conversations until their children are older, assuming that younger children are not yet exposed to online risks. For example, a mother of a four-year-old explained that she had not yet spoken with her daughter about online safety, believing it was "*not the right time*". However, during the interviews, several parents reflected on this assumption and realised that younger children may already be encountering digital environments, prompting them to reconsider the timing of these discussions.

Nevertheless, many parents make a conscious effort to talk to their children about online behaviour. They seek to educate them about potential dangers, including the fact that people online may not be who they claim to be:

> ***"Yes, we also try to warn our children. I try to explain social media to them and that you don't always know who is on the other side. I explain the risks to them. So yes, we try to warn our children."***
> - FGD3-P13[26]

Some parents emphasise the importance of maintaining **open communication and building trust**, so that their children feel safe raising concerns. One parent shared that her daughter had told her about a stranger who added her on Instagram and began flirting with her. Such moments were seen as successes, demonstrating that their children had internalised the message that "nothing is off limits" in conversations with their parents.

> ***"Yes, definitely. Sometimes my daughter comes to me and shows me that people have added her. They send messages and flirt with her through a text. My daughter immediately comes to me and shows everything. Then I saw that she had already blocked them, and we talked about it."***
> - FGD3-P13[27]

26 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.
27 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.

Despite these efforts, most parents relied on **restrictive or protective strategies to manage their children's online behaviour**. These included forbidding the use of certain apps or websites, blocking social media accounts, prohibiting interactions with strangers online, or requiring children to use devices in communal areas such as the living room or at set times. Some used parental control software, such as Google Family Link, to monitor their children's activity, while others preferred to distract them with offline tasks or household chores to reduce screen time.

Some parents checked their children's mobile devices—sometimes with their consent ("*I pay for the phone, so I can look in your phone*", INT P-34[28]), but more often without ("*I look in her phone but I do not share it with her, otherwise she will put a code on it*" INT P-47[29]). Parents generally agree that restrictions are most effective when children are young (primary school), but become increasingly difficult to maintain during puberty (transitioning to high school), as children learn how to circumvent them. Several participants emphasised that restrictions should be implemented from an early age. One parent noted that she wished she had imposed restrictions on her daughter, such as leaving the phone downstairs at night, as it is now a constant battle with her adolescent daughter (INT P-34[30]).

Overall, **parents reported feeling they lack the language, tools, or support to talk openly with their children about sexuality and digital safety**. These feelings were expressed mostly by fathers, but also by mothers from the refugee target group from Middle-Eastern countries. While they expressed a strong desire to protect their children, this protection was often reactive rather than proactive. For those who did initiate conversations with their children, discussions about online safety were often triggered by a specific event, such as a commercial, a film or documentary, or an incident of online sexual exploitation. Even among parents who reported having open communication with their children, many continued to control their online behaviour. For example, one mother of a child with a MCI explained:

> ***"The only thing I say is, when she asks 'Why are you checking my phone?' I tell her: 'You know why — I just want to keep an eye on things until you're 16. It's not about controlling you personally, it's because so much is happening nowadays. And you keep hearing about young people not being able to cope anymore.' Especially now that she's getting older. Because he [points to middle son, sitting outside] went through that too — he said he didn't want to live anymore. And now it turns out Julia feels the same way. I find that dangerous, that's why."***
> - INT-P34[31]

28 Mother with a refugee background, 52 years old.
29 Mother from the Netherlands, 44 years old.
30 Mother with a refugee background, 52 years old.
31 Mother with a refugee background, 52 years old.

The approach often became more about control than about co-regulation or dialogue, partly because many parents themselves had never experienced such conversations growing up. Some parents combined restrictive approaches with open discussions, suggesting a layered strategy that included both protection and education. However, **truly enabling approaches**—those that focus on empowering children to safely navigate the online world independently—**were rarely mentioned**. Only one parent explicitly articulated this need. She emphasised the importance of teaching children how to be digitally resilient, but also admitted that she felt unequipped to do so, due to her own limited digital literacy.

> ***"I can say that technology is developing so fast, and while we're trying to protect our children, I'm also trying to keep my daughter as far away as possible from the online world. But we can't really do that. She has to know this world — and that's a big dilemma for me. How can I introduce her to the online world in a way that's safe? I can't, because I don't know that world well enough."***
> - FGD2-P5[32]

This highlights a critical gap: **while parents often want to engage and support their children, many feel limited by their own knowledge and skills**. As a result, their strategies tend to lean more toward restriction and control rather than guidance and empowerment.

2.2.2 Puberty and Managing Online Safety

Puberty emerged as a significant turning point in how parents experience and manage online safety. While many parents reported feeling relatively confident applying restrictive strategies when their children were younger—such as blocking apps, limiting screen time, or setting firm rules—these approaches often began to falter as their children entered adolescence.

Parents described how the onset of puberty brought a shift in the parent–child dynamic. **Young adolescents were less receptive to rules and guidance**, **more likely to challenge parental authority, and increasingly private in their online behaviour**. As one parent shared:

> ***"I ask what she's doing, and she says she's chatting with friends or watching a movie. But then I can't check what's really happening. Puberty is really difficult."***
> - FGD5–P17[33]

Others emphasised the emotional tension that accompanies adolescence. Where once a simple "*no*" sufficed, teenagers now pushed back, became angry, or distanced themselves from their parents. One parent reflected on this shift:

32 Mother with a refugee background, 33 years old.
33 Mother with a refugee background, 38 years old.

> ***"Some of these kids are already like adults. They're old enough to turn off parental controls themselves."***
> - FGD5–P19[34]

Another parent highlighted how overly strict approaches could further strain an already delicate parent–child relationship:

> ***"We can't be too strict here, because children have a right to study, to play, and to use a phone. If we're too strict, they explode. And when they're in puberty, the relationship is already under pressure. If we get even stricter, the relationship breaks."***
> - FGD6–P26[35]

This tension places parents in a difficult position: while they **recognise the growing risks of online spaces**, they also **fear damaging the trust and closeness** they share with their children. Despite this awareness, **most parents did not describe a clear shift toward more enabling or collaborative strategies**. Few reported actively trying to build their children's digital skills or support their independence in safely navigating the online world. One parent, however, offered a valuable insight into the importance of starting early with open conversations. She explained that she began discussing online safety with her child as early as age six, with the intention of laying a foundation of trust:

> ***"I started early. From the age of six, so that when puberty hits and communication becomes harder, the trust is already there."***
> - FGD5–P20[36]

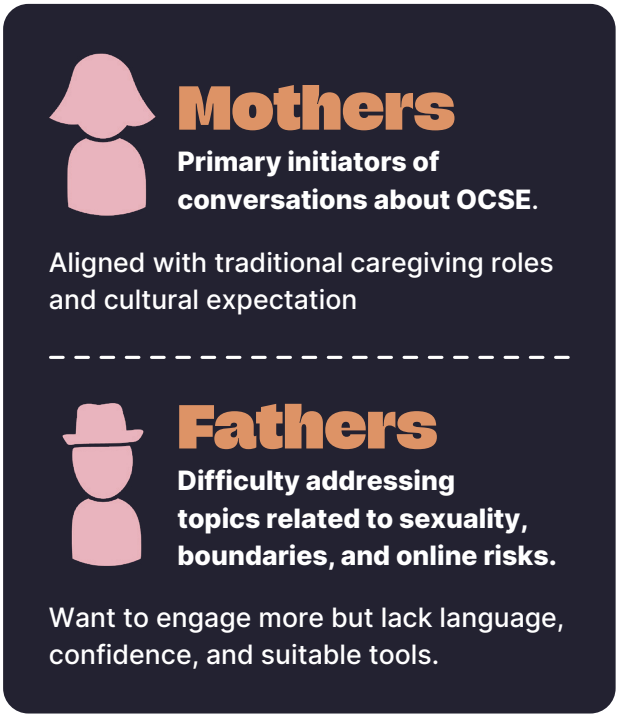
This proactive approach reflects a longer-term vision of parenting, in which early openness and dialogue serve as a buffer against the challenges of adolescence. It aligns with existing literature, which emphasises that while restrictive parenting styles may be effective for younger children, **adolescence requires more active, collaborative, and enabling strategies** (Shin & Ismail, 2014). As teenagers seek autonomy and peer connection, purely control-based methods often become less effective—and, in some cases, counterproductive.

A mother of a child with a MCI shared another strategy, recalling how she started watching TikTok videos with her daughter—not to monitor her, but to stay close: "*We'd just scroll together and laugh. And sometimes I'd ask her things, like, do you think this is okay? Or would you do that?*" (INT-P47[37]). These small, shared moments show that ***parental mediation***[38] can be relational, playful, and mutual—not only rooted in fear, but also in love and curiosity. Ultimately, these insights highlight a crucial challenge for parents: **adapting their parenting styles as their children grow**, shifting from control toward connection and empowerment, particularly in the context of digital risks.

34 Mother with a refugee background, 42 years old.
35 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.
36 Mother with a refugee background, 38 years old.
37 Mother from the Netherlands, 44 years old.
38 ***Parental mediation*** refers to the ways parents attempt to monitor, regulate, and discuss their children's media use, aiming to shape their understanding and experiences with media content to promote safe and responsible consumption (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

2.2.3 Co-Parenting

When examining how the responsibility for conversations about online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) is divided between parents, a clear pattern emerges:



When examining how the responsibility for conversations about online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) is divided between parents, a clear pattern emerges: **mothers initiate and engage more frequently in these discussions with their children**. Many mothers with a refugee background noted that this aligns with traditional caregiving roles and cultural expectation—particularly within refugee communities, where mothers are typically seen as the primary caretakers and communicators within the family.

Fathers in this target group, on the other hand, often reported greater difficulty addressing topics related to sexuality, boundaries, and online risks. Nevertheless, several fathers expressed a desire to be more involved, while acknowledging that they lacked the language, confidence, or culturally appropriate tools to do so.

> ***"As a family, we ask: how can I make sure my children feel free to talk to me? In theory it sounds good, but in practice it's not possible. We can talk about general things like which websites or apps to use, but not about the specific things you mention [sexual exploitation]. When a man and woman marry, they also find it hard to talk about such things at first; they feel shy. Many people from our community stay shy and even blush when talking about these topics. So how do we make our children want to talk to us?"***
> - FGD8-P46[39]

This gendered division of responsibility highlights the importance of **tailoring parental support and educational interventions to both roles**, addressing cultural barriers and enabling mothers and fathers alike to engage in protective conversations with their children in ways that feel respectful and accessible. Fathers, in particular, may benefit from peer-based approaches, male role models, or culturally sensitive training that empower them to take a more active role.

Gender roles also shape expectations for parents of children with MCI. Mothers frequently described themselves as the primary caregivers and mediators, while fathers were often less involved or less emotionally available. "*I don't think her father talks to her about this stuff*," one woman said. "*I never really do either… I wouldn't know where to begin*" (INT-P34[40]).

39 Father with a refugee background, 57 years old.
40 Mother with a refugee background, 52 years old.

This silence—between parents, and between parents and children—is further reinforced by taboos surrounding sex, victimhood, and assumptions about the "*innocence*" of children with impairments.

Moreover, many parents from both target groups highlighted how factors such as economic stress, mental health issues within the family, and unstable housing or school situations created environments in which parental attention and capacity were fragmented. "*There's so much going on with her*," one mother of a child with a MCI explained.

> ***"She's been on a waiting list for months. And I also have a son who just came back from a clinic, clean for three months now."***
> - INT-P35[41]

For her, online risks or sexual development were not isolated topics, but part of a larger web of survival and caregiving demands. As a result, she explained that having these types of conversations was not a priority.

Among the participants, some were single mothers—some by "*choice*" (divorced) others by circumstance (father still in war zone). Even though the fathers remained involved in all cases, the physical and social distance created by the separation further reduced their role in managing online safety.

2.2.4 Cultural Norms and Shame

A significant barrier to protecting children against OCSE lies in the cultural norms surrounding sexuality, particularly within refugee and migrant communities. For many parents in this study—especially fathers, but also some mothers—**sexuality remains a deeply taboo subject**. As a result, they avoid or postpone conversations about sexual development, sexual behaviour, and online sexual risks altogether. This silence could have implications, as it fails to provide children with essential information and guidance at a critical stage in their digital and emotional development.

During one of the focus groups, a group of fathers demonstrated the depth of this discomfort by avoiding the word "*sex*" altogether. Instead, they used euphemisms such as "*1, 2, 3*" or "*material that you will get ashamed from*." Their verbal hesitation was paired with clear emotional discomfort; they openly expressed feeling "*shy*" or ashamed when discussing such topics with their children. This cultural reluctance—though often rooted in respectability, tradition, or fear of moral decline—can leave children unprepared to recognise, resist, or report inappropriate behaviour online.

For instance, during the fathers' group, an example of online sexual exploitation was described to the researchers but was not translated to the other participants in the group, further illustrating the degree of disconfort around the topic.

41 Mother from the Netherlands, 52 years old.

> ***"Yes, I have experience with this. My daughter came home. This was just one year after we arrived here. I had no experience. She had shared photos on Instagram, and someone had taken them and asked for more. At first he was nice, but later not so kind. She got scared. I felt something was wrong. Why be afraid? You can just tell me. Then the police got involved. I asked her why she had done it. She said, 'I was just trying to flirt a little.'"***
> - FGD8-P45[42]

After this, the father shared his experience privately with the facilitator in Dutch (a language the other participants did not understand), the conversation proceeded. Later, when other fathers asked questions such as "*What should we do if this happens to our child?*" or "*How do we respond?*", the researchers felt that his story could offer a relatable example. When the facilitator gently asked whether he might want to share it with the group, he declined, saying simply: "*I cannot do that*." This moment was particularly striking because he had earlier emphasised how important this group was to him. It was a safe space for fathers who had been meeting for the past two years, where they could discuss difficult issues and support one another during a time of limited social connections. Yet even within this trusted setting, the cultural and emotional barriers to speaking openly about shame, sexuality, and daughters' vulnerability proved too great.

This silence is shaped not only by personal unease but also by strong social and cultural norms surrounding honour and family reputation. Many parents with a refugee background believe that children should only be exposed to information about sexuality at a much later age than is common in the Dutch educational system. For example, materials like the *Lentekriebels* curriculum, which introduces age-appropriate discussions about sexuality and bodily autonomy in primary schools, are often perceived as too early or inappropriate by these families.

One mother described the stakes for girls in particular, highlighting the serious consequences she feared if her daughter were to become a victim of online sexual exploitation:

> ***"What a drama! We would be beaten here—my daughter and I. They would put us on a plane back to Syria, and there we would be beaten as well. This is so dangerous because it concerns a daughter's honor. That is very dangerous. It's different for girls."***
> - FGD6–P27[43]

Such fears contribute to parents' reluctance to openly address sexual topics, which in turn increases the risk of children encountering sexual content or exploitative situations online without adequate preparation or support. The consequences of these fears should not be overlooked. One father mentioned that he felt so anxious about online sexual risks that he wished his children would marry early, "*so that I can breathe again*."

Another example was provided by a mother of a daughter with MCI, who is a second-generation migrant. She explained that if something similar had happened to her when she was young, she would have harmed herself rather than talked to her parents, because her parents at that time were still very traditional and strict. She noted that this may still be true for some young children whose parents are newly arrived migrants and who continue to hold conservative

42 Father with a refugee background, 55 years old.
43 Mother with a refugee background, 46 years old.

and traditional beliefs and attitudes. She also expressed that this has changed over time: her parents are now more progressive with their grandchildren (her daughters) than they were with her.

> ***"If something like that happened in my time, I don't think I would want to live. I couldn't have gone to my father with that. But now, fortunately, times are different. My father and my mother are much more accepting. Sometimes my father says: dress your daughters differently. Then I say: daddy the times are different, this is not the past. We have a saying [says a saying in Turkish] which means something like it has happened. We can't turn it back, we have to look forward now."***
> - INT-P47[44]

This also illustrates the importance of time and of how perspectives can change when parents receive the right information . It highlights the importance of involving "***cultural mediators***" in developing culturally sensitive conversations and training for parents, as these individuals understand the underlying fears and can address them in ways that align with cultural norms. This approach resonates with the practice of using "***credible messengers***"[45] in the Netherlands to inform children about criminal risks through peer-led interventions—a method that could be equally relevant for reaching parents (e.g., the ADAMAS network of credible messengers). Without early, culturally sensitive conversations, children may lack the tools to recognise abuse, protect their boundaries, or seek help, ultimately undermining efforts to prevent online sexual exploitation.

Among parents with children with MCI, the impact of stigma and shame appears to be less prominent. However, this does not necessarily mean that parents openly discuss sexuality and online risks related to sexual exploitation with their children. As one mother explained, other factors influence what she is able to address with her daughter:

> ***"Well, with our daughter... if we were to just have a regular conversation like: 'Okay, you're not allowed to do this on Facebook or Instagram because of this and that,' she wouldn't really be able to understand it properly [because of her mental impairment], since she might not have experienced it yet."***
> - INT-P35[46]

Later in the conversation, she elaborated that she will only discuss sexuality with her daughter once she has a boyfriend, because that is when her daughter will actually be experiencing it and therefore able to truly understand the topic. This also means that she does not discuss online risks, such as online sexual exploitation, as these remain too abstract for her daughter to grasp at this stage. The other parents acknowledged that their children might be particularly vulnerable due to their cognitive impairment, as they may not foresee the consequences of their actions.

44 Mother form the Netherlands, 44 years old.
45 "***Credible messengers***" are individuals who, due to shared lived experience or community trust, are perceived as authentic and relatable sources of guidance in outreach, prevention, and intervention work (Heller & Davis, 2019).
46 Mother from the Netherlands, 52 years old.

> ***"It's not that she's naive either, she doesn't just take everything from others. But she doesn't oversee the consequences of her behavior that much, or the intentions of another, and that's what makes it such a challenge. She can't always oversee the consequences."***
> - INT-P47[47]

However, they also indicated that they discuss sexuality in a more reactive than proactive mannar, waiting for a situation to arise that prompts a conversation about sexuality.

> ***"I tried to discuss this a week ago. But she doesn't want to talk to me about it. I said you are 14 and have a boyfriend, it is very normal. Then she said mom no way, I don't even want that yet. OK, but yes, then I did make it known and said more between the lines of that she can come to me with questions."***
> - INT-P34[48]

2.2.5 Assets

While parents expressed numerous concerns regarding OCSE, they also identified protective factors that they believed helped mitigate such risks. One of the most frequently mentioned factors was the **quality of the parent-child relationship**. Several parents emphasised their belief that OCSE was more likely to occur in families where this relationship was weak or distant.

Spending quality time individually with a child was described as a key opportunity to build trust and emotional connection. Parents noted that during these moments, children are more likely to open up and share what is on their minds.

> ***"Things change quickly, but there are always signs — especially when you spend one-on-one time with a child. You can call it family time, quality time, or whatever you want but what matters is that the child feels special. In those moments, they come closer to you and start to open up about what they're hiding or carrying inside. These are the most valuable times."***
> - FGD2-P6[49]

47 Mother from the Netherlands, 44 years old.
48 Mother from the Netherlands, 52 years old.
49 Mother with a refugee background, 40 years old.

Parents also shared a realistic perspective: they do not expect their children to be fully open or honest about everything, and acknowledge that some **privacy is both natural and healthy**. What matters to them is whether the **child feels they can approach their parents** when something truly matters or becomes risky. This aligns with the literature, especially during puberty, when children often begin to explore their own identity independently of their parents (Wisniewski et al., 2015; Livingstone & Sonia 2007).

> ***"If I look at myself — was I always honest with my parents? No. So do I expect my daughter to share everything with us? Also no. She will always keep something to herself, and that's okay — it's about proportion. Is it risky or not? [...] Of course, we would have preferred to hear about her Italian friend beforehand, but we are realistic and feel: as long as she eventually tells us, it's good enough. As a parent, sometimes you have to accept the small things and allow some freedom."***
> - FGD4-P15[50]

Another father added that the goal is not full transparency, but the creation of a space where the child feels safe approaching their parents without fear of judgment or punishment.

> ***"I also don't expect our daughters to always be 100% open and honest — and that's fine. They will always keep something to themselves, and that's okay. What we as parents need to do is ensure they feel the trust to come to us if something is wrong. She needs to feel free to choose what she wants to share — but never feel like she can't come to us. Because if she feels: 'I want to tell this, but I can't tell my parents,' then she'll turn to someone else. That's what we want to avoid. She doesn't have to tell everything — but she must know: I can always go to my parents."***
> - FGD4-P16[51]

Trust, as described by many parents, is not something that can be suddenly activated once OCSE becomes a concern; rather, it is a foundation that must be cultivated throughout a child's upbringing.

Some parents shared that they consciously discuss their own past mistakes with their children, showing them that it is okay to make errors and that problems can be solved. By doing this, they hope to normalise vulnerability and reinforce the idea that their child can always turn to them for help. As another father described:

50 Father with a refugee background, 42 years old.
51 Father with a refugee background, 39 years old.

> ***"What we do very consciously at home is that whenever our daughter comes to us with even a small problem, we try not to react negatively at all. Always from a positive attitude. We want to build her trust again and again—so she feels that whatever she brings to her parents, it's okay. We'll handle it well and help her solve the problem. That way, if something serious ever happens in the future, she will also feel safe coming to us with that."***
> - FGD4-P15[52]

Parents also communicated with their children when confronted with possible risks. When a child showed them that sexual content of a classmate had been shared, one mother explained that she used that moment to talk with her children about appropriate behaviour.

> ***"There was also once a girl at school who had sent a picture to her boyfriend and he had shared it with the whole school, she came home with that story. The bad thing is then it's all about how that girl shouldn't have done that. Even my daughter said it.***
>
> ***Then I said to her: she shared it with him not with the public, she is not to blame. That girl really suffered from it for years. I really don't want that for my daughter. That's why I'm so active about it. I guess I'm a bit of a control freak, I don't want anything to happen to her. As a result, I started the conversation with her."***
> - INT-P47[53]

52 Father with a refugee background, 42 years old.
53 Mother from the Netherlands, 42 years old.

In both cases, the daughters initially blamed the female classmates who had shared the materials with their boyfriends who then spread them throughout the school. The mother described how they discussed where responsibility truly lay (with the boy, not the girl) and why it is important to be careful with such images and not share them at all..

Another way parents supported their children's protection was by **involving older siblings** in the process. One parent described how she sometimes asks her adult daughter to help guide her younger brother, emphasising the strong bond between them:

> ***"I would sometimes ask our daughter to help. She's much older now, an adult. She and her brother have a very close bond. Sometimes it's easier for siblings to talk. They support each other, and it can help bring some balance to the things we say as parents."***
> - FGD3-P11[54]

This theme also emerged in other interviews, particularly in families with multiple children:

> ***"Fortunately she has an older sister and we discuss everything together, when we are having lunch or breakfast, they discuss everything together, and that helps. Because she looks up to her older sister and she thinks a lot of things are not acceptable and she listens to that."***
> - INT-47[55]

This illustrates that siblings can play a unique and complementary role in creating a safe space for dialogue. Parents recognise that, especially during adolescence, children may feel more comfortable sharing their concerns with a sibling. By acknowledging and encouraging these peer-like relationships within the family, parents can create an additional layer of emotional support and protection.

Finally, two mothers described how adopting a more "***friend-like***" **relationship** with their daughters helped build trust, allowing them to share anything that happened to them or their friends, both online and offline.

> ***"I try to remain young, always trying to immerse myself in my children. I try to be like a friend. And because of that, I think they are more likely to confide in me, too."***
> - INT-P47[56]

54 Father with a refugee background, 50 years old.
55 Mother from the Netherlands, 42 years old.
56 Mother from the Netherlands, 42 years old.

2.3 What Would Parents Do if Their Child Became a Victim of Online Sexual Exploitation?

"After you've dealt with that initial shock and gained your daughter's trust, in my case, I also immediately think about the next steps. I believe that you do need to go to the police and support her through that process. Because ultimately, it is abuse and it needs to be addressed legally. I also immediately think of professional help for the child, like mental health support from a psychologist. Those options exist in Turkey, and I believe they are available here as well. And lastly, there's how I would continue myself afterwards. In the heat of the moment, you might want to do something to that person for what he did to your child, but of course, that won't solve anything, so you have to find a way to deal with it. I think it's very important that, in this case, my daughter would see that the person is being held accountable. That he has been punished, because what he did is simply not right. Even if it's just a fine, or whatever, my child needs to see it. I'm not at fault, he is, and he's been punished for it. And that feeling, that it went wrong, but you shouldn't blame yourself, I would try to convey that. We just need to be careful next time so it doesn't happen again."
- FGD4-P16[57]

57 Father with a refugee background, 39 years old.

When asked how they would respond if their child became a victim of online sexual exploitation, most parents mentioned that they would turn to **formal support structures** such as the police, a psychologist, or a national reporting centre. At the same time, several of these parents admitted that they would not know where to begin. Parents with a refugee background, as newcomers to the Netherlands, expressed a lack of familiarity with existing services and systems. Unlike parents who have long-established networks and easier access to information, they described **feeling isolated and unsure of where to seek help i**n such a situation.

> ***"We are still building a life and don't know a lot of things. Sometimes we don't even know our neighbors. Us, for example, we don't even know our own neighbors. Who are our neighbors? Where can we turn to? I want to ask—here, we have no experience with the internet. And we don't know anyone and don't know who to ask if we have questions, and also don't know what to do with the questions we have himself to gain knowledge."***
> - FGD8-P44[58]

There was **no clear point of entry and no community around them** where they could easily ask such difficult questions. This sense of uncertainty was compounded by visible discomfort and anxiety among participants—particularly among those who, during the group discussion, were learning about the phenomenon of online sexual exploitation for the first time. For these parents, the idea that such harm could occur to their children felt overwhelming, especially for families still navigating life in a new country.

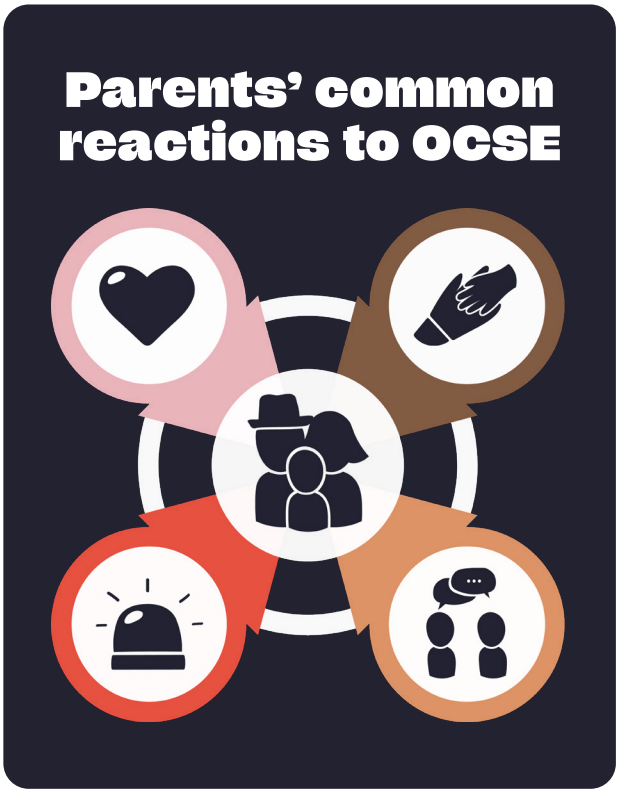
No consistent patterns were found in how parents of children with MCI or parents with a refugee background said they would respond to their children in such situations. Generally, parents with a refugee background indicated that cultural factors play a role in feelings of shame, as discussed in the previous section. However, there were also parents who tried to respond compassionately, as illustrated by the quote at the beginning of this section and the example on the following page.

58 Father with a refugee background, 57 years old.

> ***"First of all, I have participated in research in Turkey where these kinds of issues have played a role. I know from practice what disastrous consequences it can have if parents react negatively here. And I fully realize that if my daughter came to me with such a story, and I were to see, for example, photos or videos she shared, I would feel like the ground is sinking beneath my feet. I am aware of that.***
>
> ***At the same time, I know that at that moment, you must not show it—you have to stay very calm. Certainly, you should not react negatively. And definitely, you shouldn't make her feel like she shouldn't have told you, so she doesn't regret coming to you with the story. You have to make it clear that you will tackle and solve the problem together.***
>
> ***Actually, you need to start preparing for that now. For example, at home, we are very conscious that if our daughter comes to us with a small problem, we absolutely avoid reacting negatively. Always with a positive attitude, to continuously build her trust that no matter what she comes to us with, we will handle it well and make sure the problem gets solved, so that later, if something really serious happens, she will still come to us."***
> - FGD4-P14[59]

Similarly, reactions also varied among parents of children with MCI. One mother described how she would comfort and hold her child:

> ***"Horrible, yes. Well, I would definitely hold her in my arms and say, 'Oh dear, yes, this happened. You can't undo it now, but we will do everything to support and help you.' And yes, I think—well, I honestly wouldn't know how to solve it for her myself. But I would probably go to the school or seek help in some way. It seems so terrible for parents who have a child going through something like this."***
> -INT-P34[60]



59 Father with a refugee background, 39 years old.
60 Mother with a refugee background, 52 years old.

Another mother admitted she would initially feel angry:

> ***"Yes, I would really be angry with her at first, because, well, she did something she shouldn't have, right? But I know that's not the sensible way. My first reaction would be to angrily tell her off, but I know that doesn't work. I have been angry with her before, and that just backfires. Then she gets angry too, it escalates, and you achieve nothing. But now she is a few years older and becoming more responsible. If it happened now, I would sit down with her and say, 'Well, girl, who is this? How did this happen? This is not allowed.' And then have a conversation with her."***
> - INT-P33[61]

Another mother would immediately switch into action mode:

> ***"I would get crazy, but immediately go into action mode. I would call the police, find out the boy's number and call him, talk to school. With girlfriends, my family. Enlisting my husband and my brothers to go get redress from him. I engage everything and everyone. That's who I am. But I would do the same for a friend of my daughters, if something like that happened to them, I would take immediate action too."***
> - INT-P47[62]

Parents from both target groups expressed that a coordinated and multi-layered response would be essential in the event of an incident. They felt that responsibility lies not only with individual families but also with society as a whole. Several areas were mentioned as crucial pillars of support:

1. LAW ENFORCEMENT AND LEGAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Law enforcement and legal justice systems must be **approachable, trustworthy, and equipped** to handle such sensitive cases with care and cultural competence. One father reiterated the importance of a strong legal justice system:

"I find it very important that my daughter sees that this person was held accountable, that he was punished for what he did. Even if it's a fine or whatever, my child needs to see: I'm not at fault, he is—and that's why he was punished. And I want to give her the feeling that it went wrong, but she shouldn't blame herself. What we need to do is be careful next time it doesn't happen again."
- FGD4-P16[63]

2. GOVERNMENT BODIES

Government bodies were viewed as key actors in strengthening **protective legislation** and ensuring consistent implementation across various systems.

"*Why doesn't the government block the internet? Children can fall into trap faster so why do we expose them to it. We as parents don't know anything about how to block it. The Dutch government does stipulate that children should not be beaten. Why don't they think it's a problem when things happen online?*"
- FGD7-P36[64]

61 Mother with a refugee background, 52 years old.
62 Mother from the Netherlands, 44 years old.
63 Father with a refugee background, 39 years.
64 Father with a refugee background, 61 years old.

3. SCHOOLS

Schools were identified as central partners in **prevention and early detection**, with parents calling for more proactive engagement on online safety and healthy digital behaviour.

"I think it's important to have this educational lessons or courses at school from a very young age, like at primary school.. They had that lesson about sexuality at young age. This is also important but I think it is even better to inform them about internet safety at schools at an early age."
- INT-P25[65]

4. PEER SUPPORT

Peer support between parents was also emphasised. Some suggested that structured opportunities to exchange experiences and advice with other parents could help **reduce shame and isolation** while **building confidence** in how to respond to—or prevent— harm.

"For parents I know in Ukraine we had activities where parents were involved. Like what can they do? Where can they go for example if something already happened. They could support each other, exchange and get informed."
- INT-P25[66]

5. TRAINING BY MUNICIPALITIES

Training offered by municipalities on online safety and digital risks were mentioned as **best practice**, particularly the "*Ouders in Positie*" ("*Parents in Position*") initiative in the Eindhoven area.

"I learned a lot from a course I took through the municipality [parents in position], it helps in all kinds of issues children are confronted with nowadays and how parents, particularly with a migration background, can deal with it. I would recommend all parents to proactively get informed. This helps in giving yourself confidence in how you deal with your children, particularly in puberty."
- INT-P47[67]

Fathers in the refugee population especially emphasised the role of the government. Fathers from more authoritarian countries indicated that the Dutch government should take stronger measures to protect children from online risks.

Compounding these challenges, **many of these parents have limited or no digital literacy**. This not only affects their ability to monitor their children's online activities but also deepens their **sense of powerlessness** in supporting their children's safe and informed engagement with the digital world.

A difference emerged between refugee communities. **Ukrainian participants demonstrated much higher levels of digital literacy** than the other groups. They showed greater awareness of the topic and repeatedly noted that the digital environment in Ukraine does not differ significantly from that in the Netherlands.. They also expressed fewer cultural barriers when talking with their children about online issues:

65 Mother with a refugee background, 39 years old.
66 Mother with a refugee background, 39 years old.
67 Mother from the Netherlands, 44 years old.

> ***"Yes. I am sure. I have a 17-year-old boy. He teaches me about the risks. He says to me that things I am doing are actually quite risky. His freedom has enabled him to explore things on his own, but we discuss all the dangers.***
>
> ***Since he was very young, I have told him that children need to know that no one is allowed to touch or see you. No one is allowed to see you. No photos. It doesn't matter. The body is yours.***
>
> ***I can only advise him, but he has to make his own decisions. I have informed him about the risks. For example, if he is not completely mentally stable, a girl could take advantage of that. I give an example: if he sends a photo and they have a fight, she could use it against him. We discuss the possible consequences. I have also warned him that he must not misuse her photos, or he will face criminal consequences."***
> - FGD5 - P22[68]

Overall, the responses suggest that many parents with a refugee background from African and Middle Eastern countries feel unequipped to deal with the potential reality of online sexual exploitation. They expressed that **systemic investment in education, awareness, and support networks is urgently needed**. Parents who feel better informed—those who are more digitally comfortable and who know how to seek information within their community or online—also acknowledged that their knowledge is still far from optimal. They emphasised that **keeping themselves updated requires ongoing effort and attention**. One mother even expressed relief at being a stay-at-home parent, as this allowed her to devote all her time to keeping her children safe and herself informed— highlighting both the level of fear many parents experience regarding online risks and their desire to maintain a sense of control.

68 Mother with a refugee background, 42 years old.

3

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how both ecological and intersectional factors significantly influence the parental mediation strategies employed by refugee parents and by parents of children with mild cognitive impairments (MCI). Their parenting decisions around online safety are not made in a vacuum; rather, they are shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and emotional realities.

Many refugee parents, particularly those who are newly arrived, face the dual challenge of adjusting to an unfamiliar cultural context while simultaneously trying to understand the digital world. Technology such as smartphones, social media platforms, and messaging apps may be new to them, creating a steep learning curve that is compounded by language barriers and a lack of culturally appropriate resources. Similarly, parents of children with MCI often fell overwhelmed by the online risks their children may face, especially when impulsivity and limited understanding of consequences come into play.

Both groups live in ecological contexts marked by high levels of stress and instability. **Economic pressure, mental health challenges within the family, and unstable housing or school situations** create environments in which parental capacity is fragmented, and attention is constantly divided. Parents are frequently in "survival mode", prioritising immediate needs—such as medical appointments, legal matters, or housing issues—leaving limited space for proactive engagement with online safety. Within this context, online sexual exploitation may be recognised as a threat but is rarely treated as a top priority.

Consequently, **restrictive and monitoring strategies**—such as limiting screen time or checking devices—tend to be used more often than active mediation, which involves open communication and mutual decision-making. Although some parents attempt to discuss online risks with their children, these conversations become more challenging as children grow older and the subject matter becomes more complex. Refugee parents, in particular, face linguistic and cultural barriers that make it difficult to discuss sexuality and online exploitation explicitly, often relying on indirect language that reflects discomfort and limited conceptual vocabulary.

An intersectional perspective further reveals how **gender roles** shape these dynamics. In nearly all families, **mothers shoulder the majority of caregiving responsibilities**, as well as the burden of digital supervision. Fathers, when present, are generally less involved in discussions about online safety, leaving mothers to navigate these issues largely on their own. This division of labour heightens the emotional load for women, especially in households already strained by external stressors.

Overall, parents express a **strong awareness of the risks** their children face online, but also a profound sense of uncertainty about how to intervene effectively. Their strategies are shaped as much by their values and intentions as by the circumstances in which they parent. Therefore, any intervention aimed at preventing online sexual exploitation must recognise and respond to these contextual complexities. Such **interventions should be ecologically informed, culturally and linguistically responsive, and grounded in the lived experiences of parents** who are navigating parenthood at the intersection of migration, impairment, and digitalisation.

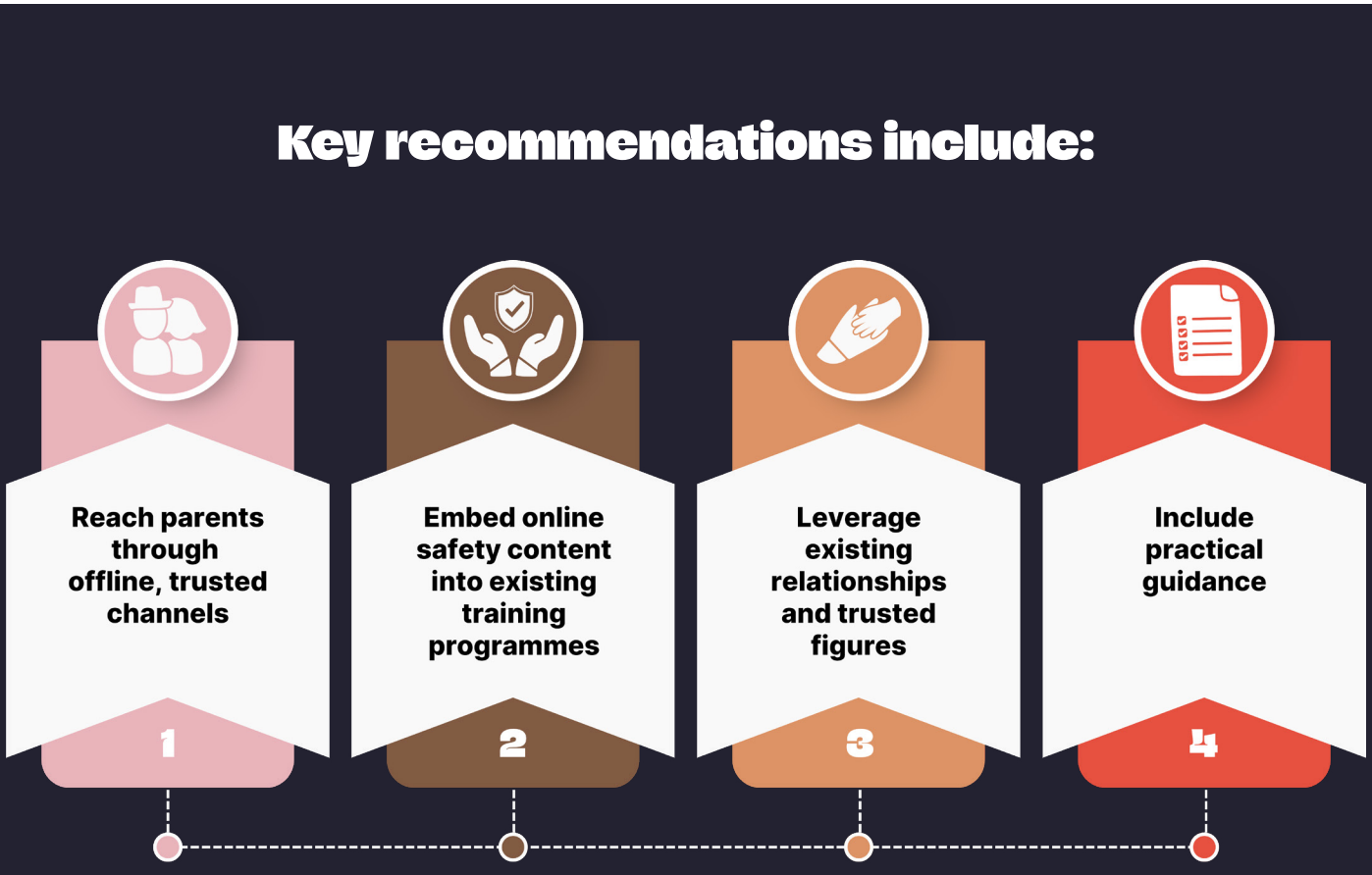
3.1 General Insights and Recommendations

3.1.1 For Refugee Parents

Given the sensitive nature of the topic—particularly for fathers, who may find it difficult to openly discuss issues related to online child sexual exploitation (OCSE), it is recommended to adopt a **phased, trust-based, and culturally sensitive approach** to engagement.

This could include the development of preparatory sessions that initially focus on building trust and mutual understanding within the group. Only once a foundation of trust has been established should discussions shift toward more sensitive topics such as OCSE. Facilitators should be carefully considered. Sessions could be led by staff from local refugee or community centres, or from within the Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL) network. To ensure sustainability and community ownership, TdH NL could develop a Training of Trainers (ToT) programme. This would allow trusted community members—such as some of the women who participated in the first focus group discussions—to be trained and compensated to facilitate sessions. This peer-led model would promote cultural relevance, trust, and long-term impact.

Refugee parents are often motivated to learn and discuss online safety, yet face significant barriers, including limited digital access, cultural norms, language difficulties, and a lack of trusted information channels.



1 Reach parents through offline, trusted channels

Most refugee parents are not easily reachable through online campaigns or platforms. Engagement is far more effective in physical spaces where they already feel safe and supported. Many community centres or refugee organisations run support groups for parents adjusting to a new environment. Interventions are likely to be most effective if TdH NL collaborates with trusted, local organisations, such as:.

- Community centres
- Refugee organisations
- Language and integration programmes
- Locations offering digital literacy courses

These hubs serve as trusted entry points for meaningful engagement.

2 Embed online safety into existing training programmes

Interventions could be integrated into training sessions that refugee parents already attend. For example, "*Ouders in Positie*", designed to empower Muslim parents to support their adolescent children in a society that places high demands on them, was specifically mentioned as a relevant platform.

3 Leverage existing relationships and trusted figures

Social workers, teachers, cultural mediators, and community volunteers often hold trusted positions in the lives of refugee families. They can act as **cultural mediators** or **credible messengers**, bridging cultural gaps and facilitating more open conversations about online risks.

4 Include practical guidance

It is important to consider not only how to reach vulnerable groups (e.g., offline outreach), but also how to engage them meaningfully. Programme materials should integrate concrete strategies for discussing online safety and OCSE in culturally sensitive ways, helping parents navigate sensitive topics while respecting their values and norms.

3.1.2 For Parents of Children with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI):

Parents of children with LvB face high levels of stress and can be difficult to reach, particularly when children are not yet formally diagnosed or receiving care, which is often the case with younger children. While the study needs to examine specific "*at risk*" groups and therefore refer to MCI, it is equally important to recognise the general vulnerability of all children to online risks. Certain children may be more vulnerable than others, depending on their specific circumstances. Considerations for future engagement and research include:

1

Stigma and shame

There is often stigma and shame associated with acknowledging that a child has MCI, particularly when the condition has not been officially diagnosed yet. During the selection phase, potential participants sometimes downplayed their child's cognitive impairment, using phrases such as "*just difficult*" or "*going through rough times*". Some of the participants we were eventually able to reach did so because we switched the language to "***vulnerable children with learning deficits***". While initial selection required verification of MCI, subsequent engagement could emphasise the general "*vulnerability of the child*" to avoid stigmatisation.

2

Parental overwhelm

Parents are often overwhelmed by the additional challenges associated with raising a child with MCI. This can make them harder to reach, as they may feel they have limited capacity to participate in research or interventions.

3

Concerns about judgment

When reaching out for an interview, parents may fear being tested on their parenting skills or feel guilty about perceived shortcomings. These feelings of inadequacy can reduce willingness to participate. Parents in this study preferred one-to-one interviews over focus groups.

4

Involvement of institutions and educators

Institutions, daily supervisors, and educators are closely involved with MCI children—sometimes more so than their parents. Future research should consider including them as participants, as their inclusion could provide valuable insights.

5

Building trust

Engaging this group takes time. Initial contact with institutions or special schools requires considerable effort to gain access, demonstrate the importance of the research, and onboard parents. Language is crucial: with primary schools, terms like "*online sexual exploitation*" were sometimes too direct ,especially if parents already had concerns about sexual education in school. In cases where we had willing schools and institutions, parents still did not participate, which may be related to some of the reasons outlined above. The parents we spoke to indicated that they knew others who would be willing to engage, but we ran out of time. In some cases, a snowball or word-of-mouth recruitment strategy may increase participation; however, this approach requires time to build ongoing relationships rather than starting anew with each research phase.

6 Research fatigue

One institution (Koraal) indicated that prior research with this group, combined with the emotional burden of caring for children who have experienced exploitation, limited their ability to participate.

7 Integration into existing structures

Interventions should not create entirely new initiatives, but rather connect with existing care, educational, or support programmes that families are already involved with.

8 Language and framing

References to children with MCI should use simple, respectful, and non-stigmatising language. While this was a selection criterion for the research, it played a limited role in group discussions. Overly clinical or technical terms can confuse or alienate parents, reinforcing harmful labels.

9 Simple and accessible communication

Some mental impairments may be genetic, meaning that parents themselves could face cognitive challenges. Campaigns and interventions should take this into account when communicating information.

10 Respect the emotional load

The emotional and practical pressure these parents face should be acknowledged. Interventions should be low-threshold, accessible, and designed to support, rather than add to daily pressures.

11 Timing and triggers for discussion

When discussing risks, all MCI parents indicated that their children are often unable to understand or manage the consequences of their behaviour online. Parents, therefore, prefer to address issues reactively, triggered by specific events—such as a TikTok video, a Snapchat post, a TV campaign, the film–*Adolescence*[69] (which was mentioned by participants), or an incident involving another child—rather than engaging in general discussions about online risks, which may be perceived as too abstract or ineffective. This should be taken into account when developing tailored tools for this group of parents.

69 *Adolescence* is a British limited series (Netflix, 2025) portraying the arrest of a 13-year-old boy accused of murder. Through intense, single-take episodes, it explores the secret online lives of teenagers, highlighting how parents are often unaware of what is shared on social media.

3.1.3 For Both Groups: General Insights

MAKE IT AS ACCESSIBLE AS POSSIBLE

Extend online campaigns to include offline materials and training. An online campaign assumes a level of digital literacy that many parents may not have. Consider how schools can integrate online safety awareness into their communications with parents. Engage community leaders, youth workers, and schools as partners in reaching parents. This type of campaign requires ongoing, long-term effort to achieve impact. Where possible, integrate the insights from the campaign into broader parent training programmes.

EMPOWER CONVERSATIONS, NOT FEAR

Interventions should strengthen parents' capacity to have open, age-appropriate conversations about general online risks, including screen time, privacy, gaming and exposure to inappropriate content. Within this broader framework, information about online sexual exploitation can be included as a natural and important component, without being the sole focus from the outset.

FOCUS ON GENERAL ONLINE SAFETY

Parents often express broader fears and confusion about the online world and how to discuss it with their children. Many feel unequipped to guide or supervise online behaviour. While online sexual exploitation is important, parents generally express interest in learning how to discuss online behaviour and risks with their children more broadly. Addressing sexual exploitation too directly at the outset may prevent parents from engaging. For primary school children in particular, parents generally feel that these issues are not yet relevant. Framing the message around general online safety—rather than focusing solely on "online (sexual) risks"—is more likely to resonate. Using positive language, such as "*Online Safety*", also tend to be more effective.

ENSURE MUTUAL BENEFIT FOR PARTICIPANTS

Research and dissemination should be designed as a two-way process. In the current setup, parents primarily provided information to researchers, but participants were eager to share experiences and learn. Parental groups could be used to both gather insights and provide parents with practical knowledge about online safety, creating a win–win situation. Interactive sessions—rather than traditional focus group discussions—could achieve the same research goals while providing parents with valuable information and potentially reaching a broader audience, particularly within the MCI community.

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Terre des Hommes Netherlands

TERRE DES HOMMES NETHERLANDS
Grote marktstraat 43,
2511 BH The Hague,
The Netherlands

Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Terre des Hommes Netherlands is an international non-governmental organisation headquartered 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. We are guided by values that are human-centred, playful, bold, and responsible.