Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Down to Zero
Fighting sexual exploitation of children

From Risky Connection to Inclusive Protection

Children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and Online Sexual Exploitation in the Netherlands

2026

VOICE IDENTITY project
Identity, Diversity, and Exploitation: Navigating and Tracing Intersectionality related to Tech-facilitated Sexual Exploitation of Youth

Acknowledgements and Imprint

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full report

accessible version

RESEARCH TEAM:

Research design by:	Eva Notté, Charlotte Tierolf, Fadime Özcan, Nathalie Meurens, and Dr. Kimberley Anderson
Qualitative data collection by:	Charlotte Tierolf, Eva Notté and Fadime Özcan
Quantitative data collection by:	**Savanta**
Written by:	Isabella Lanza Turner, Nieves Barreiro Gayoso, Rueben Groot, and Eva Notté
Reviewed by:	Dr. Zosa Gruber, Charlotte Tierolf, Jeanne-Marie Quashie, Monique Demenint, and Dr. Kimberley Anderson
Design by:	Marieke de Ligt

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Terre des Hommes Netherlands
Grote Marktstraat 43
2511 BH The Hague
The Netherlands
https://int.terredeshommes.nl

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Introduction

Introduction

LGBTQIA+ is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of sexual orientations, gender identities and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) that differ from traditional norms. These traditional norms generally presume that people are:

- **heterosexual**, meaning that they are primarily romantically or sexually attracted to people of a different sex or gender than their own;
- **cis-gender**[1], meaning that their gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth, and;
- **endosex**, meaning their sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, hormones, and genitalia) fit typical medical definitions of male or female.

LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (or sometimes Questioning), Intersex, Asexual, and many others represented by the plus sign. Children and adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+ often navigate complex realities shaped by **social stigma, discrimination, and unequal access to protection**. Because their gender identity, sexuality or sexual characteristics differ from the norm, children who identify as LGBTQIA+ experience peer rejection (Fisher et al., 2024) bullying, exclusion, violence and mental distress at higher rates than their peers (Geunis, 2018). In addition, a lack of inclusive and affirming support networks may leave children who identify as LGBTQIA+ more vulnerable to manipulation and psychological distress (Mallon et al., 2022; Capaldi et al., 2024).

This even happens in countries with progressive legal frameworks such as the Netherlands. In this context, progressive refers to the existence of strong equality and anti-discrimination policies, such as the Dutch Equal Treatment Act (Algemene Wet Gelijke Behandeling, 1994) and the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Constitution in 2023, alongside comprehensive sexuality education in schools (AWGB, 1994; Rijksoverheid, 2023; SLO, 2020). However, despite these frameworks, everyday realities for children who identify as LGBTQIA+ remain marked by stigma and gaps and invisibility in protection systems (Movisie, 2023; Rutgers, 2022). As stated above, children who identify as LGBTQIA+ already face higher rates of violence and abuse from peers (Fisher et al., 2024) and often face revictimisation when met with institutional biases if children disclose such experiences. These attitudinal and institutional barriers **compound vulnerabilities** and contribute to low reporting of abuse, leaving many children without adequate protection or psychosocial support.

These inequalities extend into **digital environments**. Online spaces can offer tremendous benefits for children who identify LGBTQIA+, as it is a vital space for identity exploration and connection. LGBTQIA+ youth are more likely to use online platforms to seek information about their gender, sexuality or sex characteristics, explore their identity, connect with LGBTQIA+ or supportive peers, and find community and information that may not be readily available offline or in school (Byron et al., 2019). However, the internet can also reproduce social hierarchies and expose children to harassment, manipulation, and sexual exploitation (Evelyn et al., 2022; Fisher et al., 2024).

A particular concern is **online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC)**, which refers to "*all acts of a sexually exploitative nature carried out against a child that have, at some stage, a connection to the online environment*" (ECPAT International, 2016, p. 17). This includes grooming, live-streamed

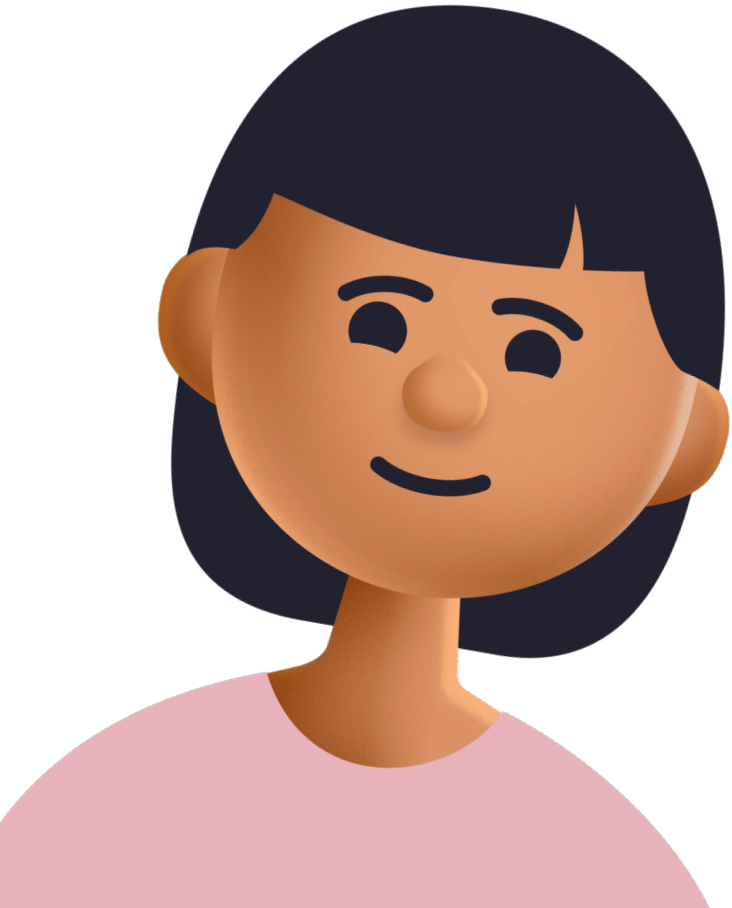
1. The prefix "cis" is Latin for the "on this side of", which is the opposite of "trans", meaning "across or on the other side of".

sexual abuse, sexual extortion, the creation or sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), or coercion to perform sexual acts in exchange for money, gifts, or emotional validation (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2023). Perpetrators often exploit feelings of isolation or fear of being outed, manipulating children into sharing sexual content or engaging in exploitative relationships under the guise of care or connection (Martin-Storey et al., 2022). In addition, new threats such as AI-generated CSAM, synthetic sexual imagery, and digitally facilitated sexual extortion pose additional risks that challenge existing legal and protection frameworks.

In the Netherlands, reported cases of online sexual coercion and abuse have steadily increased in recent years (Fonds Slachtofferhulp, 2025). National data are rarely disaggregated by gender identity, sexual orientation or sexual characteristics. Consequently, the specific risks and patterns of exploitation affecting children who identify as LGBTQIA+ remain largely invisible within mainstream prevention and response systems. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the unique risk and protective factors of children who identify as LGBTQIA+ in relation to online sexual exploitation. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Examine how children who identify as LGBTQIA+ understand and experience online safety, risk, and protection.
2. Identify the social, cultural, and digital dynamics that shape their vulnerability and resilience.
3. Highlight how families, educators, and child protection actors can foster safer and more inclusive online environments.

This research is part of a four-part series about the risk and protective factors of different groups of children in relation to OSEC (the **VOICE-IDENITY project**). By centering the diverse identities and voices, for instance of youth identifying as LGBTQIA+, this study does not frame them as inherently vulnerable but rather seeks to understand how intersecting factors, such as sexuality, gender identity, social acceptance, and access to support, shape their digital realities. Recognising children as active agents, not passive recipients of protection, this research contributes to building systems that are inclusive, responsive, and affirming of all children, both online and offline.



Methods

Methods

This study forms part of the broader VOICE project (2024) – Values, Opinions, and Insights from Children and their Caregivers about E-Safety – and its subsequent phase, VOICE-IDENTITY (2025): Identity, Diversity, and Exploitation: Navigating and Tracing Intersectionality related to Tech-facilitated Sexual Exploitation of Youth. The overall methodology was developed and executed by the Dutch research team at Terre des Hommes Netherlands and followed a mixed methods design. The research protocol and tools were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee Social Sciences of the Radboud Universiteit in the Netherlands (ECSW-2024-135), in line with ethical standards for research with children.

This report compares findings of children who identify as LGBTQIA+ with data from 32 Dutch peers (12-17 years old) representing the general child population from the first phase of the study, called VOICE (ECPAT International et al., 2024). For parents of children who identify as LGBTQIA+, it will be compared to 501 parents of children from the general population, collected through a survey during the same VOICE research. This secondary use of the VOICE data helps to contextualise the specific vulnerabilities and strengths of children who identify as LGBTQIA+ in relation to their peers and will be shown through results in separate boxes throughout the results.

Literature review

The literature review combined grey and academic sources, identified through search terms such as “online sexual abuse and exploitation” in combination with “queer”, “LGBT”, or individual letters of the LGBTQIA+ umbrella term, such as “lesbian” or “asexual”. Searches were conducted using Google Scholar, Google, and the Vrije Universiteit Library database. Studies were included if they focused on OSEC, online violence or safety, or internet use in relation to LGBTQIA+; were published from 2014 onwards; and met established credibility criteria for authority, accuracy, coverage, objectivity, date, and significance (Tyndall, 2010). Data were extracted systematically into a spreadsheet, with entries capturing each source’s focus, methodology, and key findings relevant to the research questions.

Methods with children

Initially, the study intended to conduct small group interviews with children who identify as LGBTQIA+, in line with the participatory approaches in the broader VOICE study. However, this approach proved unsuccessful. The research team attempted to recruit participants in various ways, through partner organisations working closely with the target group, as well as outreach on social media platforms (Pinterest and Instagram). Over a period of four months in the beginning of 2025, a sufficient number of children indicated their interest, but many preferred an anonymous survey. In addition, children lived in different parts of the country or did not know any peers from the LGBTIQA+ community to join them, making a group setting impossible. The methodology was therefore adapted to accommodate six individual interviews. The interviews took place at a location chosen by the participant (e.g. at home, online, a public place) with an approximate duration of 1,5 hours. In order to reach more children and to tailor to the expressed needs of children who identify as LGBTQIA+, we transformed the questions into an online survey format. Respondents were recruited through the panel of survey company Savanta.[2] This method proved to be more successful, with 108 respondents completing the survey in two weeks.

2. Savanta supports the public sector by delivering evidence-based research and actionable insights to government, education, healthcare, and non-profit organizations. Savanta conducts citizen engagement studies, service evaluations, and policy impact assessments, enabling public sector clients to address emerging needs, demonstrate accountability, and make informed decisions efficiently. With sector-specific expertise and tailored methodologies, Savanta ensures that findings are both credible and impactful for policy-making and service improvement.

To protect participants' anonymity, the characteristics of all 114 children (from both the interviews and the survey) are presented in aggregate in table 1 below. All participants were between 14 and 17 years old, with one 18 year and one 21 year old. The majority of respondents identified as female (53%), followed by identification as male (30%) and non-binary (18%). One person didn't choose a category. Almost half of the respondents indicated they identified as bisexual (49%). A smaller proportion identified as lesbian (16%), gay (9%), queer (9%), and non-binary (9%). Transsexual, intersex, asexual and the other category received two votes each (2%).

Table 1. Child Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Number of children	Percentage of total
Gender Identity	Girl	60	53%
	Boy	34	30%
	Non-binary	19	18%
	Other	1	1%
LGBTQIA+ identification	Lesbian	18	16%
	Gay	11	9%
	Bisexual	56	49%
	Transsexual	2	2%
	Queer	11	9%
	Intersex	2	2%
	Asexual	2	2%
	Non-binary	10	9%
	Other	2	2%
TOTAL		**114**	

Parent interviews

Similar to the children, Individual, semi-structured interviews were planned with caregivers, where children in the study could indicate whether their parents could be interviewed as well. As only one child was comfortable with this (resulting in one parent interview) and the recruitment of respondents proved difficult, the interview questions were transformed into an online survey. Through Savanta's panel, 86 parents completed the survey. In table 2, the characteristics of all 87 parents are presented together to ensure anonymity. Parents had a mean age of 46 years old (age range 33-61) and more fathers (55%) than mothers (45%) participated in the survey. Similar to the child sample, most parents in the survey had a child that identified as bisexual (31%) or lesbian (29%), and to a lesser extent as gay (22%). Other subgroups of the LGBTQIA+ community were less often recognised, such as a child that identifies as non-binary (5%) or queer (1%).

Table 2. Parent Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Number of parents	Percentage of total
Age group	24-35	2	2%
	35-44	39	45%
	45-54	38	44%
	55-64	8	9%
Gender Identity	Female	39	45%
	Male	48	55%
LGBTQIA+ identification of their child	Lesbian	25	29%
	Gay	19	22%
	Bisexual	27	31%
	Queer	1	1%
	Non-binary	5	5%
TOTAL		87	

Stakeholder interviews

Individual interviews were held with 12 stakeholders, using a topic list covering online behaviour of children identifying as LGBTQIA+, benefits and challenges, cultural and societal views about the LGBTQIA+ community, and support needs. Stakeholders represented different experts on the LGBTQIA+ community, social workers, academics, and different organisations supporting various subgroups of the community (e.g. an organisation focused on bisexuality).

Data collection and analysis

For all respondents, participation was voluntary, and they were reminded they could pause or quit the interview or survey at any time without any consequences. Consent forms were provided in written form and signed before participating in any of the research methods. Quantitative data was analysed in a spreadsheet and using SPSS. Qualitative data was audiorecorded, transcribed, and pseudonymised. Together with the open answers from the survey, they were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using ATLAS.ti Web software. Each transcript was coded by two researchers, using a pre-made codebook based on the research questions and the socio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1974).

With the Ecological Systems Approach, Bronfenbrenner (1974) conceptualises child development to occur within a set of four nested systems, each influencing and interacting with the other. The child is in the centre. The microsystem is directly around the child, representing direct environments such as family, peers, and teachers. Around that system is the mesosystem, capturing interrelationships between the settings in the microsystem, such as parents interacting with teachers, that also influence the child. The furthest away is the macrosystem, representing the broader socio-cultural context. For instance, societal norms, policies and laws, which provide the overarching framework within which the child develops. Recognising the increasingly central role of digital technology in children's lives, Johnson and Puplampu (2008) proposed the addition of the techno-subsystem within the microsystem. This includes children's interactions with digital devices, online platforms and the socio-technical architecture of the internet. We return to this model in the conclusion.

Results

Results

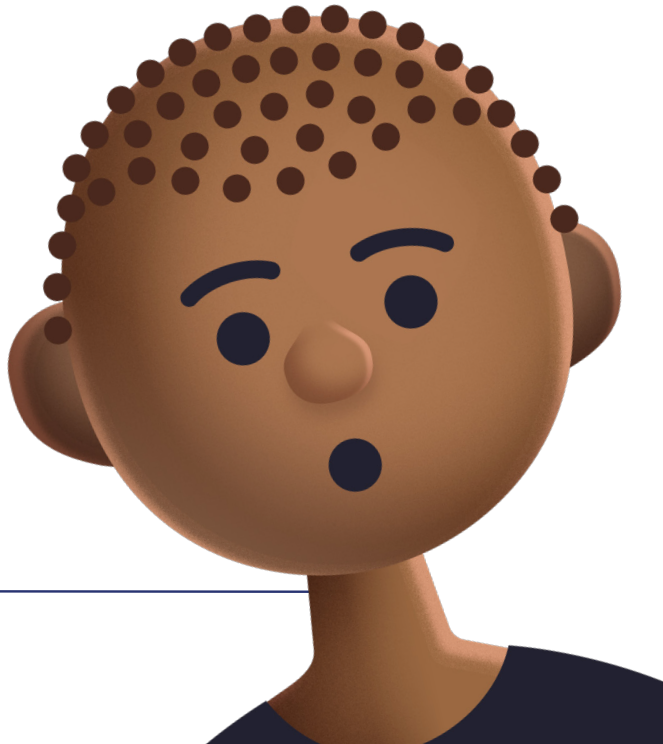
This section presents the main findings from children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and their parents in the Netherlands. It outlines how children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and their caregivers experience the online world, its opportunities, risks, and forms of support, followed by an analysis of cross-cutting themes.

What Children who Identify as LGBTQIA+ are Doing Online

Children who identify as LGBTQIA+ are active digital users who engage online for connection, expression, and learning. Most participants had their first personal social media or gaming account around the age of **11.8 years**. The average time spent online was **4.5 hours per day**, with the most popular platforms being **WhatsApp (71%), TikTok (56%)**, and **Instagram (44%)**.

Nearly all children said they communicate online with **friends (94%)** and **family (75%)**, but more than half **(55%)** also interact with people they have never met in person. Common discussion topics included **hobbies and shared interests (73%), schoolwork (69%)**, and **personal feelings or mental health (56%)**. Adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+ described the online space as one of the few environments where they can express themselves, explore identity, and connect with others with similar experiences.

In relation to the **comfort level of expressing their sexual or gender identity online**, about one in three (31%) said they actively use social media to connect with others who share their identity. For example, one of the interviewed children said: "*I think (...) that a lot of LGBTQ or queer people and children [...] are looking for community online, [and] that they are looking for examples online*."[3] This quote illustrates how online spaces serve as important environments for children who identify as LGBTQIA+ to seek representation, role models, and belonging that may be missing offline. About a quarter of the children who identify as LGBTQIA+ (24%) said they would like to explore and express their sexual or gender identity online, but do not yet feel safe or comfortable doing so. A substantial part of the group does not feel safe enough to engage in these spaces openly, revealing the tension between the potential for connection and the persistent barriers of fear and insecurity.



3. Youth who identifies as queer, aged 21 years old

Box A: Comparison of children who do identify as LGBTQIA+ and who do not identify as LGBTQIA+ - online behaviour

Both children who do and don't identify as LGBTQIA+ reported accessing the internet from an early age. Non-LGBTQIA+ children first engaged with online platforms at an **average age of 8.4 years**, considerably earlier than their LGBTQIA+ peers, who first accessed online spaces at **11.8 years old**. However, the difference in average daily time spent online was smaller, with non-LGBTQIA+ being **4.7 hours per day** compared to 4.5 hours per day for the LGBTQIA+ group.

Children who did not identify as LGBTQIA+ primarily described online platforms as sources of entertainment or communication, rather than as spaces for social and emotional support, in contrast to children who identify as LGBTQIA+. Notably, the most frequently used online platforms varied between the groups of children. **TikTok** was the only platform widely used by both groups. For children who do not identify as LGBTQIA+, **Snapchat (42%)** and **YouTube (38%)** were among the most popular platforms whereas WhatsApp (19%) and Instagram (27%) were less commonly used. These preferences differ from those of children who identify as LGBTQIA+, who reported higher usage of the latter platforms.

How Children who Identify as LGBTQIA+ Feel About Online Safety

The perceptions of children who identify as LGBTQIA+ of online safety were mixed and often shaped by experiences of stigma and discrimination. Almost half (**47%**) described feeling *somewhat safe*, **28%** felt *neutral* and **25%** felt *unsafe*. Feelings of safety varied considerably across identities: lesbian, non-binary, and trans participants tended to feel less safe than others, reflecting that belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community is not necessarily a uniform experience.

One child noted that the nature of online spaces could facilitate bullying behaviour, especially towards LGBTQIA+: "*I think people online might be a little less embarrassed to leave hateful comments. So I think [children who identify as LGBTQIA+] might be a little more at risk for that.*"[4] Another interviewee highlighted the broader social context shaping these experiences, explaining that "*in general, [children who identify as LGBTQIA+] are more likely to face bullying, [...] there is a lot of stigma and prejudice. In real life it is not so easy to come out openly. It also really does vary a lot by context of course, but they do have a weaker position.*"[5]

4. Girl who identifies as bisexual, 17 years old
5. Boy who identifies as gay, 16 years old

Awareness of OSEC was relatively high. Nearly half (47%) of respondents said they had heard of or encountered situations that fit the description of OSEC. When asked how safe they felt from such exploitation, 43% said *somewhat safe* and 22% said *neutral*. Most (44%) believed they were equally safe from OSEC as other children, but 9% felt less safe. Notably, children from Christian or Islamic backgrounds were more likely to report feeling less safe than peers without religious affiliation. This pattern may reflect several intersecting factors. Religious norms and stigma surrounding sexuality can limit open discussion about online risks, leaving children less confident or supported when navigating digital spaces. In more conservative households, conversations about safety often emphasise avoidance or morality rather than empowerment, which may heighten anxiety about potential exposure to sexual or identity-related content (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Baams et al., 2018). For LGBTQIA+ adolescents, experiences of internalised stigma or fear of judgement from faith communities can further amplify feelings of vulnerability online (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Yip, 2005). Together, these dynamics may explain why children from Christian and Islamic backgrounds in this study reported feeling less safe than their non-religious peers.

Most children reported practising basic online safety behaviours, such as **avoiding the sharing of personal information** (39%) and **using strong passwords** (39%). However, regional patterns suggested differing levels of caution: children in Gelderland, Noord-Brabant, and Utrecht were more likely to adopt protective behaviours, whereas those in Zuid-Holland, Noord-Holland, and Groningen reported lower rates of these practices.

Box B: Comparison of children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and who do not identify as LGBTQIA+ - online safety perception

Perceptions of online safety differed between children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and who don't identify as LGBTQIA+. Children who identify as LGBTQIA+ tended to report slightly lower levels of safety feeling online, whereas the majority of non-LGBTQIA+ felt *(somewhat) safe* (54% versus 43% for LGBTQIA+ youth) or *very safe* (15% vs 14%). A slightly higher percentage of children who do not identify as LGBTIQA+ felt *neutral* (31% versus 22%) in regards to online safety. Notably, none reported feeling unsafe (0% versus 25%. These findings suggest that children who identify as LGBTQIA+ are more likely to feel unsafe online.

Experiences Across LGBTQIA+ Identities: Diverse Realities Online

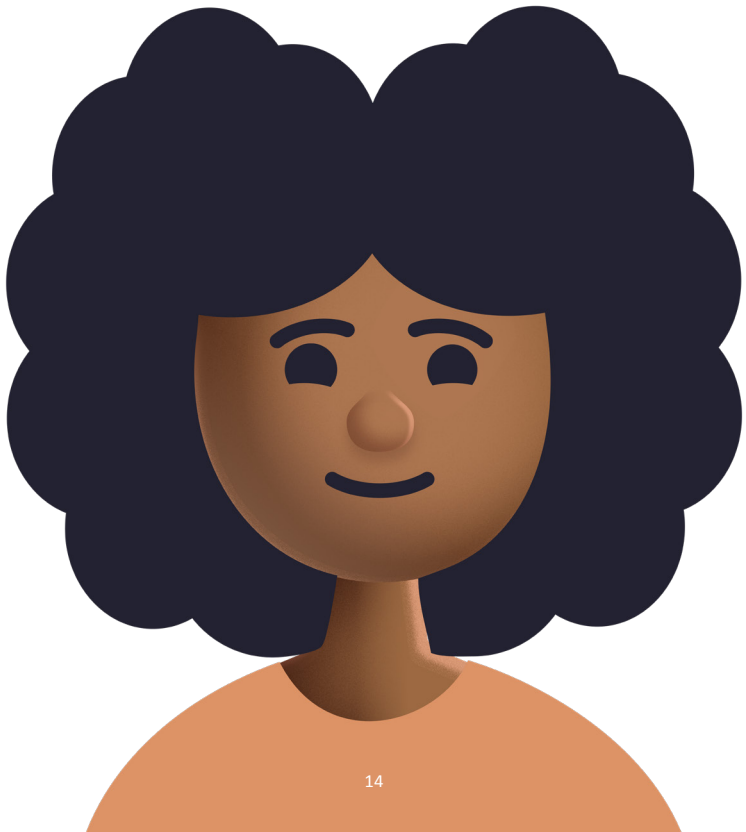
While there are thus certain shared experiences amongst adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+, their online realities are far from uniform. As was stated in the introduction, LGBTQIA+ is an umbrella term that encompasses many different types of gender and sexual identities, and sexual characteristics. Each group navigates digital spaces in distinct ways, shaped by unique intersecting factors such as gender, visibility, stigma, and access to support. The following sections explore how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and queer adolescents in the Netherlands engage with online environments, perceive safety, and experience both empowerment and risk, by combining earlier studies with VOICE-IDENTITY data. We are aware that intersex and asexual are missing, as too little information was found about these subgroups. In addition, we recognise that these boxes do not capture the experiences of all that fall within the listed or associated categories. As one expert rightly points out: "*children who fall a bit more under the 'plus' don't necessarily identify with any of those labels, but they do have experiences or feelings that don't align well with the straight-cis group*."

Lesbian

Lesbians are women who form romantic, emotional, or sexual relationships with other women (Institute of Medicine, 1999). Representing 16.7% of the sample, lesbian respondents reported discussing their sexual orientation online less often than other participants. A reason for this could be that lesbians experience intersecting forms of marginalisation, as they belong to **both a gender and a sexual minority** (Meyer, 2007). As a result of less comfortability with expressing their sexual orientation, lesbian adolescents in this study reported fewer opportunities to learn about their identities or seek advice online compared to their peers.

Lesbian respondents were among those who **felt least safe online** and more frequently reported feeling **sad or anxious** after encountering negative news or hate speech. This mirrors global evidence showing persistently high rates of violence and harassment faced by lesbians and other people who identify as LGBTQIA+. For instance, one-third of lesbians in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa report having experienced sexual violence both online and in-person, and 58% of individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ across European countries faced harassment within a 5 year timespan (Ahlenback, 2023). Even though these figures come from different contexts, they underscore a broader pattern of hostility that shapes lesbian youths' sense of safety, both offline and online.

Despite these vulnerabilities, no statistical difference was found between lesbian respondents and others in terms of screen time, suggesting that lower feelings of safety do not necessarily reduce online engagement. Overall, lesbian participants' experiences highlight a digital paradox: while online spaces hold potential for community and self-expression, persistent stigma, lateral discrimination, and exposure to online hate can limit how openly lesbian youth engage or seek support online.



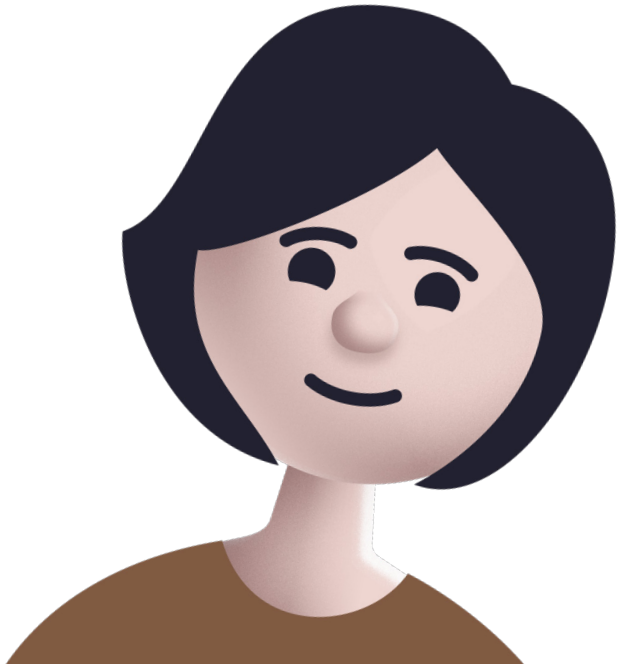
Gay

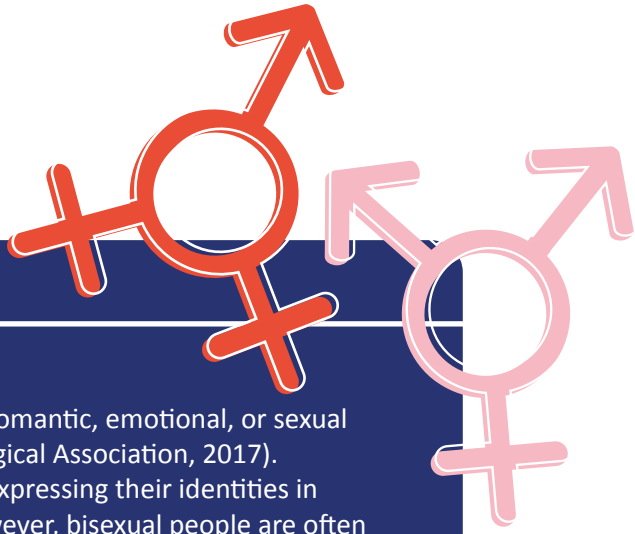
The term ‘gay’ refers to individuals, most commonly men, who experience romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction to others of the same gender (The Trevor Project, 2024). Gay individuals experience **greater risks of online abuse, harassment, and exploitation** than non-gay individuals (eSafety Commissioner, 2021; Hatchel et al., 2017), although these experiences are often under-reported. This is partly linked to **gender norms**: men are generally less likely to report sexual violence or exploitation, and this pattern carries into online spaces. In addition, harmful or exploitative situations involving gay men may be overlooked or misinterpreted. Because most dominant ideas about relationships come from heterosexual contexts, exploitation affecting gay men can become less visible and, at times, more socially accepted (Fox, 2016).

Representing 9.3% of the sample, gay respondents in this study were more likely than others to engage in online discussions about **work, politics, and social activism**. This aligns with previous studies suggesting that gay men tend to be more politically expressive and civically engaged in online spaces (Chan & Magni, 2025). Such engagement may reflect the historical link between visibility, advocacy, and community belonging within gay networks.

In terms of digital habits, gay respondents reported using Snapchat less frequently than other participants but expressed feeling safer on online forums. Many described online environments as important places for learning and self-discovery: compared to other respondents, a higher proportion of gay participants said they used the internet to **learn about their identity and seek advice**. This pattern may indicate a stronger reliance on online information and community spaces, particularly where offline support remains limited or stigmatised.

Overall, gay adolescents’ experiences in this study reflect a mix of **digital empowerment and caution**. Online spaces provide meaningful opportunities for learning, expression, and political engagement, yet they remain shaped by broader social inequalities and exposure to prejudice. These dynamics underscore the importance of inclusive online communities and protective mechanisms that allow gay youth to participate and express themselves without fear of discrimination or harm.





Bisexual

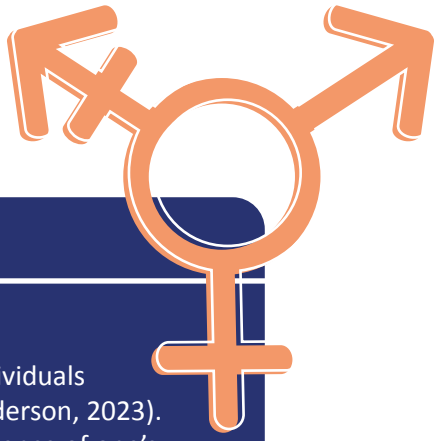
The term 'bisexual' refers to a person that experiences romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction to more than one gender (American Psychological Association, 2017). Experiences of bisexuality are diverse, with individuals expressing their identities in multiple ways and to varying degrees (Swan, 2018). However, bisexual people are often described as facing **bi-invisibility**, a form of marginalisation that leads to their identities being misunderstood, dismissed, or erased both within mainstream society and LGBTQIA+ communities (Davenport-Pleasance, 2024).

Comprising 48.1% of the sample, bisexual respondents represented the largest identity group in the study. Despite this, many reported **discussing their identity or self-expression online less frequently** than other participants. Previous research from the Netherlands found that bisexual individuals experience disproportionately high levels of unwanted sexual advances compared to other groups (Akkermans et al., 2020). Fear of objectification or misunderstanding, both online and offline, may therefore contribute to more cautious engagement with online discussions about identity.

Bisexual respondents also reported that they were **less likely to find useful information or advice online** about their sexuality compared to other groups. This reflects broader evidence of a lack of inclusive resources and representation for bisexual youth, who are often overlooked in sexual education and online communities alike. Nonetheless, bisexual respondents stood out for reporting **stronger communication with caregivers**: many said they could talk openly with their parents about online experiences, suggesting that family support can be an important protective factor for this group.

Interestingly, bisexual participants rarely mentioned turning to **websites or helplines** for support, indicating that formal or institutional channels may feel less relevant or trustworthy to them. Their reliance on personal networks rather than public resources mirrors patterns of *bi-invisibility*, where a lack of dedicated or affirming spaces limits help-seeking behaviour.

In sum, bisexual adolescents' experiences reveal a distinct combination of visibility and erasure. While they constitute the largest subgroup within the sample, they are less vocal online about their identities and feel less represented in available resources. These dynamics highlight the need for online safety and mental health initiatives that explicitly include bisexual youth and recognise the unique stigma and misunderstandings they continue to face within and beyond LGBTQIA+ spaces.



Transgender

The term transgender (or trans) is an umbrella term used to describe individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth (Anderson, 2023). Transgender identity is understood as the deeply felt and personal experience of one's own gender, which may or may not align with societal expectations or binary categories of "male" and "female" (Buck, 2016). Research consistently shows that transgender children and adolescents face **heightened risks of stigma, discrimination, and violence**, both online and offline, which can increase their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse (Capaldi et al., 2024). These risks are compounded by limited representation, misgendering, and the lack of affirming digital spaces.

Representing 1.9% of the sample, transgender participants in this study were among those who **felt least safe online**. They described digital environments as places where expressing their true identities often comes with exposure to hostility and misunderstanding. This aligns with other studies showing that transgender youth are among the most likely to report feeling unable to be their authentic selves online, a challenge that often leads them to create **secondary or anonymous accounts** as safer spaces for self-expression (Gohairan et al., 2023).

Transgender respondents also reported feeling **sad or anxious** when confronted with online hate or negative news about gender-diverse people. Many expressed that **digital platforms should adopt clearer rules and stronger enforcement** against hate speech, discrimination, and sexual exploitation. Their emphasis on accountability and safety reflects a broader demand among transgender youth for online environments that prioritise respect, visibility, and psychological well-being (Austin et al., 2020).

Overall, the experiences of transgender adolescents reveal both the **necessity and fragility of digital belonging**. For many, online spaces offer vital opportunities for identity exploration and connection, yet these same spaces can amplify exclusion and harm. Creating safer digital environments therefore requires not only better platform regulation and moderation but also increased representation, visibility, and inclusion of transgender voices in policies, education, and online safety initiatives.

Non-Binary

Non-binary is an umbrella term used to describe gender identities that do not fit exclusively within the binary categories of male or female (Richards et al., 2016). Non-binary individuals may experience and express their gender in a variety of ways, challenging binary norms and expectations. In our sample, 17.6% of children identified as non-binary when asked about their gender identity. Although non-binary is not explicitly represented by a letter in the LGBTQIA+ acronym, we included it as one of the response options when asking with which LGBTQIA+ group they identified. Only 9.3% selected non-binary there, with others choosing categories such as gay or lesbian. This indicates that non-binary children have multiple identities that are important to consider for both gender and the sexual orientation, which may for some create a double dimension of marginalisation.

In our sample, non-binary respondents reported (on average) that they engaged with digital platforms at an older age than other groups. Alongside lesbian and transgender participants, non-binary children also expressed feeling usafe in online environments, although they described **online forums as relatively safer and more supportive spaces**, where they could connect with others who share similar experiences. These findings are consistent with international research showing that non-binary youth are particularly vulnerable to online harassment and exclusion (eSafety Commissioner, 2021). In addition, research consistently shows that non-binary adolescents face higher rates of **mental health difficulties**, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, than both cisgender youth and other groups within the LGBTQIA+ community (The Trevor Project, 2024; Klinger et al., 2024). These heightened risks are closely linked to social stigma, discrimination, and the lack of recognition of non-binary identities in daily life.

Overall, the experiences of non-binary adolescents illustrate the **dual nature of the internet** for gender-diverse youth. While online spaces can offer affirmation, belonging, and community, they can also expose users to transphobia and harassment. For non-binary youth, this balance between connection and vulnerability underscores the importance of inclusive moderation policies, visible representation, and safe online and offline spaces where diverse gender identities are recognised and respected.

Queer

The term ‘queer’ refers to individuals whose gender identity or sexual orientation does not conform to traditional, binary, or heteronormative categories. It is often used as an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities (Goldberg et al., 2019). While the term has been reclaimed as a source of pride and inclusivity, its meaning remains fluid and context-dependent, shaped by personal interpretation and cultural discourse.

Research specifically addressing the experiences of queer youth in relation to online sexual exploitation remains limited. Existing studies primarily highlight their increased visibility as targets of online harassment, trolling, and discrimination (Lingel, 2021). This study therefore contributes to a growing evidence base by exploring how queer adolescents in the Netherlands experience safety, expression, and risk in digital environments.

Representing **9.3%** of the sample, queer respondents stood out for their distinct online patterns compared to other groups. They **felt safer on social media** but **less safe on online forums**, where anonymity and unmoderated interactions can increase exposure to hate or hostility. Despite reporting relatively higher feelings of safety, queer respondents were also among those **most emotionally affected** by encountering negative news or hate speech online, reflecting the psychological toll of ongoing exposure to discriminatory content.

In terms of online behaviour, queer participants, similar to gay respondents, were less likely to use Snapchat but more likely to engage in **discussions about politics, social issues, and activism**, suggesting a strong orientation towards advocacy and civic participation. However, they also reported **lower levels of support from parents or caregivers**, indicating potential gaps in offline protection and emotional safety. Consistent with broader research, some respondents explained that maintaining **secondary or anonymous accounts** helped them keep their online activity private from family members, particularly when their identity was not fully accepted at home (Gohairan et al., 2023).

When asked about what would make online environments safer, queer respondents placed strong emphasis on **clear platform rules against hate speech and sexual exploitation**, a priority also echoed in global studies showing that youth that identifies as LGBTQIA+ are more likely to use safety tools such as blocking and reporting features (Gohairan et al., 2023). Regarding research participation, queer adolescents expressed that **flexible and confidential communication formats**, such as interviews by video, phone, or written responses, made them feel safer to share their experiences.

Overall, the experiences of queer adolescents illustrate the complexity of online engagement for youth whose identities resist categorisation. While digital spaces can provide affirmation, connection, and political voice, they can also amplify exposure to hate, emotional distress, and isolation, particularly when offline support is limited. Ensuring that queer youth are both represented and protected online requires recognising the diversity within their experiences and fostering digital environments where difference is met with respect, not risk.

Parental Perceptions: Opportunities, Risks, and Dialogue

Parents generally recognised both the benefits and the risks that accompany their children's online engagement. A majority (58%) said that the internet helps their child **connect with other youth** who identify as LGBTQIA+ or communities, highlighting the importance of digital spaces as sites of belonging and validation. Another 42% identified access to affirming information and resources as a key advantage, and 37% valued opportunities for creativity and self-expression related to their child's identity.

Regional patterns were evident: parents in Noord-Holland and Utrecht were more likely to view online spaces positively, citing access to representation and inclusive content, while parents in other provinces, particularly more rural areas of the Netherlands, expressed greater concern about exposure to harm. Perceptions also varied by the child's identity. Parents of bisexual and non-binary children tended to emphasise the internet's role in providing supportive communities, whereas parents of lesbian children were more sceptical about online safety, particularly regarding anonymity and exposure to harmful content.

At the same time, parents expressed significant **concern about the risks** faced by children who identify as LGBTQIA+ online. Half (50%) cited bullying or harassment as a major issue, while 47% pointed to hate speech and discriminatory content. Almost one-third (29%) mentioned unwanted sexual messages or advances, 28% reported difficulties identifying trustworthy online communities, and 27% referred to pressure on children to share personal or intimate information. These patterns reflect well-established global findings that adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+ are disproportionately targeted by cyberbullying, online harassment, and sexualised messaging due to stigma and bias (Fisher et al., 2024).

Parental perceptions of online sexual exploitation risks varied widely. Nearly half (45%) believed the risk for their child was low, while 31% rated it medium. About one in three (31%) felt their child faced somewhat higher risks than other children, often citing fear of **grooming or coercion** through false expressions of romantic or emotional interest.

Box C: Comparison of parents with a child who identifies as LGBTQIA+ and parents of the general population - OSEC

All parents expressed concern about online risks, including online sexual exploitation and abuse, although parents with a child that identifies as LGBTQIA described more identity-specific vulnerabilities.

Notably, 11% of parents of the general child population reported that their child disclosed an online sexual exploitation and abuse concern, compared to a larger share of parents with a child who identifies as LGBTQIA+ (27%). This shows that youth that identify as LGBTQIA+ are more vulnerable to OSEC, as is recognised by other research where LGBTQIA+ youth is said to be often approached online by adults who exploit their search for acceptance or community (ECPAT International, 2021).

In addition, parents of the general population expressed higher confidence in addressing OSEC concerns, with 86% of parents that had dealt with a disclosure before knowing how to address it. Parents of a child that identifies as LGBTQIA+ expressed that they were unsure how to discuss issues related to sexuality.

Despite acknowledging risks, parents generally viewed **open communication and trust as central protective factors**. The majority expressed willingness to talk about online safety and to provide guidance, but many admitted uncertainty about how to address sexuality-related issues online. As one parent shared, she advises her young son, who identifies as gay, to be cautious about what he reveals online: "*Don't talk about religion. Don't talk about your orientation (...) and also don't talk about what you earn, because those are still three items [that are] fought over the most, so to speak. Or where the most pain is suffered*."[6] This gap between awareness and confidence highlights the need for accessible, inclusive resources that equip parents to navigate discussions about identity, consent, and safety in digital contexts.

This touches on an observation about the sample that might influence the findings. In the survey, we specifically recruited parents with a child who identifies as LGBTQIA+, meaning that they already knew their child identifies as LGBTQIA+. Open communication and trust might therefore be easier, as the gender or sexual identity of the child is known. This is not necessarily reflective of the broader population. In the children's interviews, several participants expressed hesitation about speaking to their parents or getting parental consent for the interview, with some that were not yet out to their parents. This indicates that open communication between parents and children who identify as LGBTQIA+ is not always the norm. Another observation is that while the children's sample reflected eight different LGBTQIA+ subgroups, parents indicated that their children belonged to five subgroups. This discrepancy suggests that parents may be less aware when their children identify with less visible or less widely known subgroups of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Online Benefits, Risks, and Protect-ive Factors

Online Engagement: Opportunities and Entry Points for Support

For children who identify as LGBTQIA+, online spaces provide **crucial opportunities for identity exploration, self-expression, and community connection**, particularly where offline support is limited or unsafe. As one participant described: "*it's an annoying atmosphere sometimes, but also nice for everyone that you can look things up, or find a community*."[7] This statement reflects the duality of the internet, recognising that while online spaces can sometimes feel unpleasant, they also provide opportunities for accessing information and finding a community.

In this study, 36% of respondents said they could express themselves more freely online, and 34% reported using the internet to learn about different identities or seek advice. These patterns echo European research showing that adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+ rely heavily on digital communities when offline settings feel unsafe or non-affirming (Martin-Storey et al., 2022). Evidence from Nepal shows the same trend: many LGBTQIA+ adolescents reported that online spaces were the only environments where they could safely explore their gender or sexuality, noting they often felt "safer" online than in face-to-face interactions (Terre des Hommes Nepal, 2023). Similarly, LGBTQIA+ children in the Philippines described online communities as essential for belonging and emotional support, particularly where offline stigma restricted access to trusted adults or peers (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2025).

Online engagement is therefore not a luxury. It is meaningful and often necessary. Recognising this significance is key to understanding why children need protective, inclusive systems, both informal and formal, that help keep these digital spaces empowering rather than risky.

6. Mother of a boy who identifies as gay
7. Boy who identifies as bisexual, 14 years old

Exposure to Identity-Based Harm: The Cost of Visibility

The same digital spaces that enable connection can also expose children to harm. 34% of respondents reported receiving **bullying or mean messages related to their identity**, and 31% said that exposure to **hateful or negative content caused sadness or anxiety**. Global evidence consistently shows that youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ face disproportionate online hostility, including cyberbullying, exclusion, and hate speech (Fisher et al., 2024; Evelyn et al., 2022; Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021). These findings underline a central paradox: children need support not because online spaces are inherently harmful, but because the risks exist in close proximity to the benefits. Even when online engagement provides empowerment and community, it can come at an emotional cost.

In addition to exposure to bullying and hate, nearly half of respondents (47%) said they had heard of or encountered situations that fit the description of OSEC, including unwanted sexual contact, pressure to share images, or exposure to sexualised content. One child interviewed reflected on this sense of vulnerability, noting: "*you can really feel very alone, and you can feel very different and [then] you will look it up online anyway. And that makes you very vulnerable and you actually make it even easier for people to exploit you or take advantage of you online*."[8] This reveals an awareness of the vulnerability experienced by children who identify as LGBTQIA+ seeking belonging online, illustrating how feelings of isolation can lead them to digital communities that offer affirmation and connection, yet also expose them to potential risks.

Previous research shows that marginalised youth, including children who identify as LGBTQIA+, are more likely to experience targeted **grooming, and other forms of exploitation online**. Feelings of isolation drive engagement in digital communities that offer affirmation and belonging, but these same spaces may increase vulnerability to abuse (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Byron et al., 2019). Nepalese LGBTQIA+ young people described similar risks: many experienced repeated harassment, doxxing, or unwanted sexual messages across multiple platforms, with dating apps and chat-based platforms identified as common entry points for grooming (Terre des Hommes Nepal, 2023).

Interviews with multiple stakeholders showed that the heightened online vulnerability of children who identify as LGBTQIA+ stems primarily from the social marginalisation, stigma and lack of safe online support that makes them seek connection and identity exploitation in digital spaces. One highlighted how these online environments are both a possibility for refuge and a risk source: "*They can also find others that they identify themselves with, because perhaps also in a regular face-to-face setting, it may be more difficult. They can all find others with whom they identify. It's also a way to have a safe space to be themselves. On the other hand, there's also research that shows more of the dark side of these online contexts, because that can also lead to abuse. You never know who's on the other side*."[9]

A specific vulnerability for LGBTQIA+ children in the context of OSEC is the fear of being outed. Several interviewees noted that not being out yet, or not wanting others, including parents, to know, can heighten susceptibility to pressure or blackmail. Experts described risks of "*unwittingly being outed online*"[10] and threats such as "*if someone finds out you are queer… they'll threaten to out you*."[11] As one expert summarised, the fear that "*people find out about your sexual identity, which you're not yet ready to discuss with your parents*" can be exploited, including through demands for photos or favours "*under the guise of: otherwise I will out you*."[12]

8. Girl who identifies as bisexual, 17 years old
9. Educational and diversity expert
10. Expert from the Online Child Abuse Expertise Bureau
11. Gender related violence expert
12. Expert from the Online Child Abuse Expertise Bureau

Support Systems and Protective Factors: What Helps Children Cope or Seek Help

Family Communication and Trust

Parental dialogue emerged as a critical protective factor. Most parents reported discussing general online safety regularly, with 41% doing so monthly and 30% weekly. Conversations specifically addressing sexual exploitation, consent, or identity were less frequent, with only 34% occurring every few months and 27% weekly. More than half of parents encouraged their children to report uncomfortable online experiences, and 45% maintained open and regular dialogues about online safety.

Parental confidence was moderate: 43% described themselves as "*a little confident*," and 37% as "*very confident*" in preventing OSEC. Parents of bisexual and non-binary children were more likely to discuss safe online exploration, whereas parents of lesbian and trans children were less likely. Many expressed a desire for more inclusive, practical guidance, with 36% requesting materials tailored to children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and examples of age-appropriate, gender-responsive language.

Children largely corroborated these findings: 62% reported feeling able to talk to parents or carers about online problems. Overall support was high, with an average score of 8.3 out of 10, though identity-specific differences persisted. Bisexual children reported the most open communication, while queer participants were least likely to perceive strong parental support.

VOICE project

Box D: Comparison of parents with a child who identifies as LGBTQIA+ and parents of the general population - Confidence and open communication

Compared with the general parent population, parents raising children who identify as LGBTQIA+reported **more frequent conversations** about general online safety but **lower confidence** and **less consistency** when the conversations involved identity, consent, or sexual exploitation. While parents from the general population rated their knowledge highly (average **8.55/10**) and felt aware of their children's online activities (with **91%** describing themselves as somewhat or completely aware), parents of LGBTQIA+ children were more cautious: only **37%** felt "very confident" in preventing OSEC, and identity-specific conversations occurred far less often, with just **34%** discussing topics like consent or exploitation every few months.

Children's perspectives also highlight a meaningful contrast. Parents from the general population believed communication was relatively open (with **62%** thinking it was somewhat or very easy for their child to talk to them), yet children's reports were mixed: only **15%** of interviewed children agreed it was easy, while most were neutral. LGBTQIA+ children reported higher levels of perceived openness, with **62%** saying they could talk to parents about online problems and giving parental support an average score of **8.3/10**.

Friends, Peers, and Informal Networks

Informal networks of friends and peers provide a second layer of protection. 66% of children said they trusted friends as sources of support, often turning to peers or online communities before adults, particularly when anticipating judgment or invalidation. This pattern is well documented: adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+ frequently rely on peer networks for

affirmation, identity exploration, and coping (Craig & McInroy, 2014; McDermott et al., 2013). Online peer communities can offer critical forms of solidarity and emotional support (Byron et al., 2016), especially when offline environments feel unsafe or unsupportive. However, despite this reliance, one in four children reported feeling hesitant to connect openly with peers who share their identities, reflecting ongoing concerns about exposure, stigma, and social repercussions. Research shows that fears of outing, peer judgement, and social exclusion remain significant barriers to help-seeking among youth who identify as LGBTQIA+, even within seemingly supportive networks (Hill et al., 2021; Fish et al., 2020).

Schools: Everyday Gatekeepers of Safety and Inclusion

Schools emerged as the most common point of help-seeking in the study, with 58% of children reporting they would approach a **teacher or another school-based adult when something goes wrong online**. This places educators in a central bridging role between children's online experiences and the wider safety ecosystem. Many parents reinforced this expectation: 34% wanted schools to strengthen online-safety education, and 28% requested guidance on recognising signs of distress or exploitation, indicating that families often rely on schools to fill gaps in knowledge, confidence, or language around identity and online risk.

At the same time, children's experiences suggest that **school support is uneven**. Some described teachers who were approachable, informed, and respectful of diverse identities; others mentioned environments where staff avoided conversations about gender and sexuality altogether or responded with discomfort. These inconsistencies matter, because when children anticipate judgement, especially around identity, they are less likely to disclose experiences of cyberbullying, hate speech, or sexual exploitation.

Research across Europe shows similar patterns: many schools still lack structured policies or feel it is "too sensitive" to address identity-specific online harm (McBride et al., 2021). Without institutional clarity, support depends on the goodwill of individual teachers, leaving high levels of variability in children's access to protection. Data from the Philippines shows similar patterns: although schools were a common site for disclosures, many lacked gender-sensitive or trauma-informed procedures, leaving LGBTQI+ children unsure whether teachers would respond with care or judgement (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2025).

Professionals and Child-Focused Services: Gaps in Awareness and Preparedness

Child-focused organisations, social workers, helplines, and youth services form another crucial layer of support. However, stakeholders in this study consistently described gaps in professional preparedness. One stakeholder explained that even when services are technically available, children don't experience them as safe, particularly when professionals lack training in gender-diverse vocabularies, use non-affirming language, or approach disclosures through a heteronormative lens. Others pointed to cultural or institutional norms that treat identity as peripheral or "adult" content, making it difficult to discuss openly.

These systemic issues create real consequences: children may underreport, delay seeking help, or rely solely on peers. Global research also highlights that professionals often focus narrowly on general online safety without integrating identity-sensitive approaches, leaving young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ without tailored responses that reflect their lived experiences (Byron et al., 2019).

Parents echoed this gap. While many expressed willingness to support their children, they also voiced uncertainty about how to interpret signs of distress or how to respond if their child experienced identity-based bullying or OSEC. Several explicitly asked for training, materials, and inclusive communication guidance, further demonstrating that professional systems play a critical role in building adult confidence and capacity.

Platforms and Digital Environments: Tools, Moderation, and Structural Limitations

Digital platforms themselves form a third protective layer, yet children described these **digital environments as inconsistent in safety, responsiveness, and relevance to their identities**. 32% wanted better reporting and blocking tools, expressing frustration with systems that felt slow, complicated, or ineffective. 31% asked for more information tailored specifically to LGBTQIA+ youth, including guidance on navigating online spaces safely, dealing with harassment, and recognising grooming or manipulated contact. Many children felt platform safety messaging was aimed at a generic audience, failing to acknowledge the distinct risks faced by those exploring or expressing diverse identities. Parents reinforced this need: 36% wanted LGBTQIA+-responsive resources they could share with their children, and 29% wanted clearer guidance on identifying risks that disproportionately affect gender-diverse or sexual-minority youth.
In addition, 47% of children supported stronger penalties for online bullying and exploitation, including faster account suspension, stricter identity verification for adults contacting minors, and clearer pathways for reporting sexually explicit content. These calls reflect a recognition that platforms hold structural power, shaping the environments where both empowerment and harm occur.

Systems Level

Systems-level findings from this study highlight how structural gaps within the Dutch child protection and digital safety ecosystem heighten online risks for children who identify as LGBTQIA+. Children's experiences show that protection is uneven across institutions, with support often depending on the awareness, confidence, and openness of individual adults rather than clear, inclusive policies. Many children anticipated judgement, misunderstanding, or unwanted disclosure when seeking help, particularly around identity-based harm or sexual exploitation. As one stakeholder explained: "*I would imagine then if at some point you get caught up in an abusive situation, online or offline, and you experience that as an LGBTI young person, then it's all the more difficult to ask for help or go to someone to explain the situation because you immediately expose something about your sexual orientation and preference. That's often something they want to keep secret. So even faster they walk around [with it] alone*."[13]

A major underlying driver of this vulnerability is the persistence of rigid gender norms and heteronormative expectations. Children who depart from conventional ideas of masculinity or femininity, whether in appearance, behaviour, or online expression, face discrimination when reporting sexual abuse and exploitation (Bardwell et al., 2025). For many children who identify as LGBTQIA+, this creates a chilling effect: the fear that reporting harm will result in scrutiny of their identity rather than support for their safety.

International evidence reinforces this dynamic. In the Philippines, 78% of children reported that shame and fear of being outed stopped them from disclosing online harm, particularly among those whose gender expression did not align with local norms (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2025). Nepali LGBTIQ+ adolescents similarly described how stigma linked to gender nonconformity limited their willingness to approach services and contributed to repeated online victimisation (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2023). While the Dutch context differs, these findings echo the core pattern emerging in this study: gender norms directly influence whether children feel safe enough to seek help.

Without identity-sensitive policies, trained and confident professionals, and digital systems that account for the specific risks faced by gender-diverse children, online spaces remain unevenly protective. Strengthening these structural safeguards, and addressing the gendered norms that shape children's help-seeking, is essential to ensuring that all children can navigate the digital world safely.

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13. Gender and sexuality expert

Conclusion

Conclusion:

Layers of Risk and Protection in Children who Identify as LGBTQIA+

This study highlights the complex digital realities of adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+ in the Netherlands, revealing how online spaces can function simultaneously as sites of affirmation and harm. While many participants described the internet as a vital space for connection, identity exploration, and support, their experiences also underscored persistent inequalities rooted in stigma, exclusion, and structural discrimination.

Across groups, feelings of safety online were unevenly distributed. Lesbian, transgender, and non-binary participants tended to feel less safe and more affected by exposure to hate or discriminatory content, while gay respondents were somewhat more likely to find community and information online. Bisexual participants, despite being the largest group in the sample, reported lower visibility and fewer relevant online resources, reflecting broader patterns of bi-invisibility. These differences show that online risks and opportunities are deeply shaped by intersecting identity factors, social acceptance, and access to support.

At the **individual level**, identity exploration and online engagement were crucial for self-understanding and belonging. Yet the same visibility that fostered connection also increased exposure to harassment, unwanted contact, and emotional distress. This tension between empowerment and vulnerability underscores the need to centre children's agency while addressing the risks specific to LGBTQIA+ youth.

The **techno-subsystem** captures the digital architecture shaping children's daily interactions with technology. For adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+, algorithms, design features, and platform policies can both amplify and mitigate harm. Recommendation systems that prioritise engagement over well-being often expose children to hateful content or unwanted contact, while privacy settings and reporting tools remain inconsistent across platforms. At the same time, online forums, moderated communities, and affirming digital content can foster belonging and resilience. The design of digital platforms therefore plays a direct role in shaping protection and participation. Embedding *child safety by design* principles, such as intelligent privacy defaults, transparent reporting processes, and inclusive moderation, can transform the techno-subsystem from a site of risk into one of empowerment.

Within the **microsystem**, family, peers, and schools played defining protective roles. Open communication between children and caregivers emerged as one of the strongest protective factors, though many parents expressed uncertainty about how to discuss sexuality, identity, and online exploitation. Children often relied on peers and online communities for advice and emotional support, especially when they feared being misunderstood by adults. Schools were frequently mentioned as potential safe spaces, but were seen as lacking the inclusive materials or guidance needed to address LGBTQIA+ digital safety comprehensively.

At the **mesosystem** level, limited collaboration between families, educators, and child protection systems can leave gaps in prevention and response. Inclusive digital education, staff training, and accessible referral mechanisms are essential to ensure that children feel supported when something goes wrong online.

Finally, the **macrosystem**, comprising societal attitudes, legislation, and digital governance, continues to influence LGBTQIA+ adolescents' sense of safety. Despite progressive legal frameworks, stigma and online hate remain widespread, perpetuating fear of visibility and limiting access to justice. Policies and platform governance should therefore prioritise inclusive representation, stronger moderation of online hate, and explicit protection for youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ within national and EU-level child online safety frameworks.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that safety for children who identify as LGBTQIA+ is not only about protection from harm but also about **creating affirming environments**, online and offline, where they can express themselves freely, seek support without fear, and build meaningful connections. Across the study, children showed remarkable resilience. Many described creative coping strategies, blocking, reporting, shifting platforms, or turning to affirming communities, that helped them navigate hostile or exclusionary online environments. These strengths sit alongside persistent structural barriers. Ensuring that children can fully harness their protective strategies requires systems that reinforce, rather than undermine, their efforts. Creating affirming environments across home, school, community, and digital platforms enables adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA+ to express themselves freely, explore their identities safely, and seek help without fear of judgement or exposure. Strengthening multi-layered protection systems that integrate families, schools, peers, and platform governance is therefore essential. By combining structural protection with recognition of children's agency, resilience, and self-defined strategies, stakeholders can ensure that all children, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression, experience the internet as a space of safety, inclusion, connection, and care.

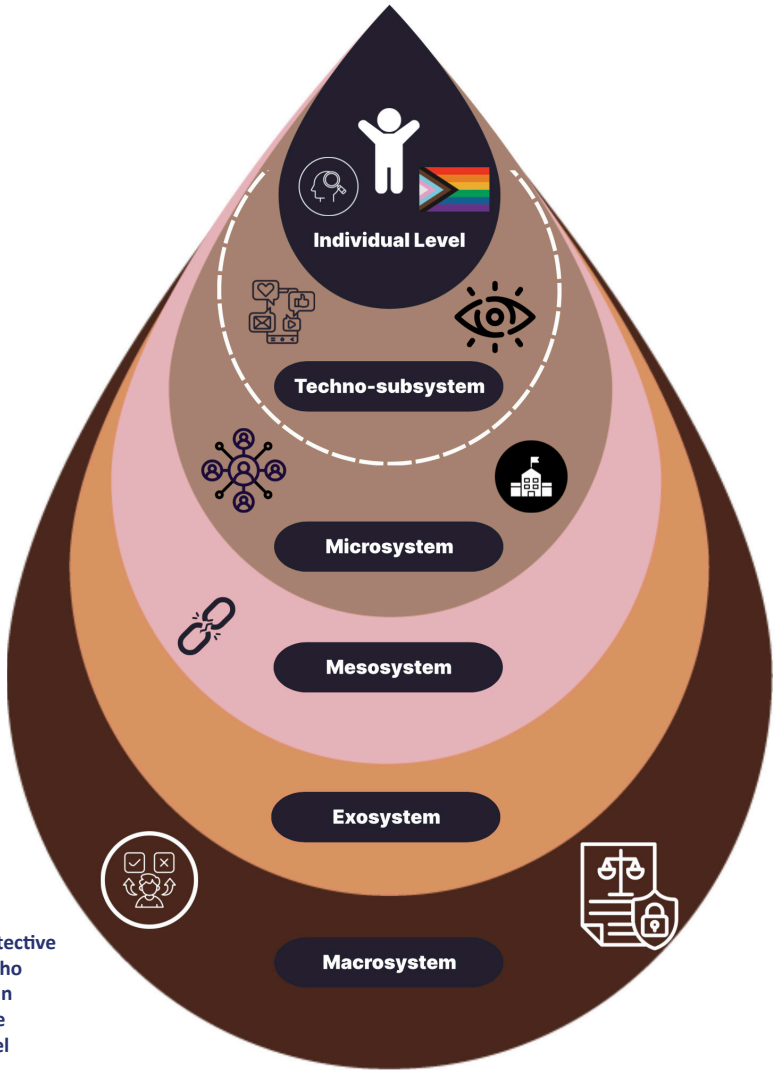


Figure 1. Risk and Protective Factors for Children who Identify as LGBTQIA+ in the Netherlands in the Socio-Ecological Model

Box C: Key Recommendations for Safer and More Inclusive Digital Environments

FOR FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

- Encourage open, non-judgmental dialogue with children about online experiences, identity, and consent.
- Access inclusive resources and collaborate with schools and organisations to better understand children who identify as LGBTQIA+'s digital realities.
- Foster supportive home environments that validate children's identities and promote safe help-seeking when harm occurs.

FOR SCHOOLS AND EDUCATORS

- Embed diverse LGBTQIA+ perspectives and online safety within the school curricula.
- Provide training for teachers and school counsellors to address identity, online risks, and exploitation with sensitivity and inclusion.
- Establish confidential, visible, and accessible reporting channels in schools for incidents of online harassment or exploitation.

FOR CHILD PROTECTION AND SUPPORT SERVICES

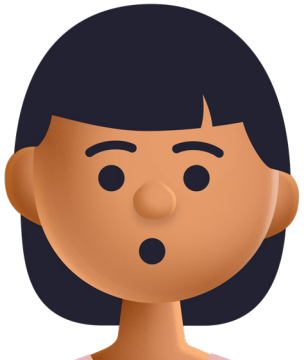
- Ensure helplines, psychosocial services, and referral systems are inclusive of LGBTQIA+ identities and explicitly advertised as such.
- Collaborate with LGBTQIA+ and youth organisations to design and deliver awareness campaigns, prevention materials, and safe participation spaces grounded in lived experience.
- Include LGBTQIA+ sensitivity in professional training for all frontline workers responding to online sexual exploitation, grooming, or harassment.

FOR DIGITAL PLATFORMS

- Adopt "safety by design" measures, including intelligent privacy defaults and child-friendly reporting tools.
- Strengthen moderation systems to address hate speech, cyberbullying, and exploitation targeting youth who identify as LGBTQIA+.
- Partner with LGBTQIA+ organisations and young people to inform product design, policies, and content guidelines.

FOR GOVERNMENT AND POLICYMAKERS

- Integrate LGBTQIA+-inclusive online safety measures into national and EU child protection frameworks.
- Address hate speech, discrimination, and technology-facilitated exploitation through stronger regulation and accountability.
- Ensure children who identify as LGBTQIA+ can meaningfully participate in policy development affecting their digital lives.



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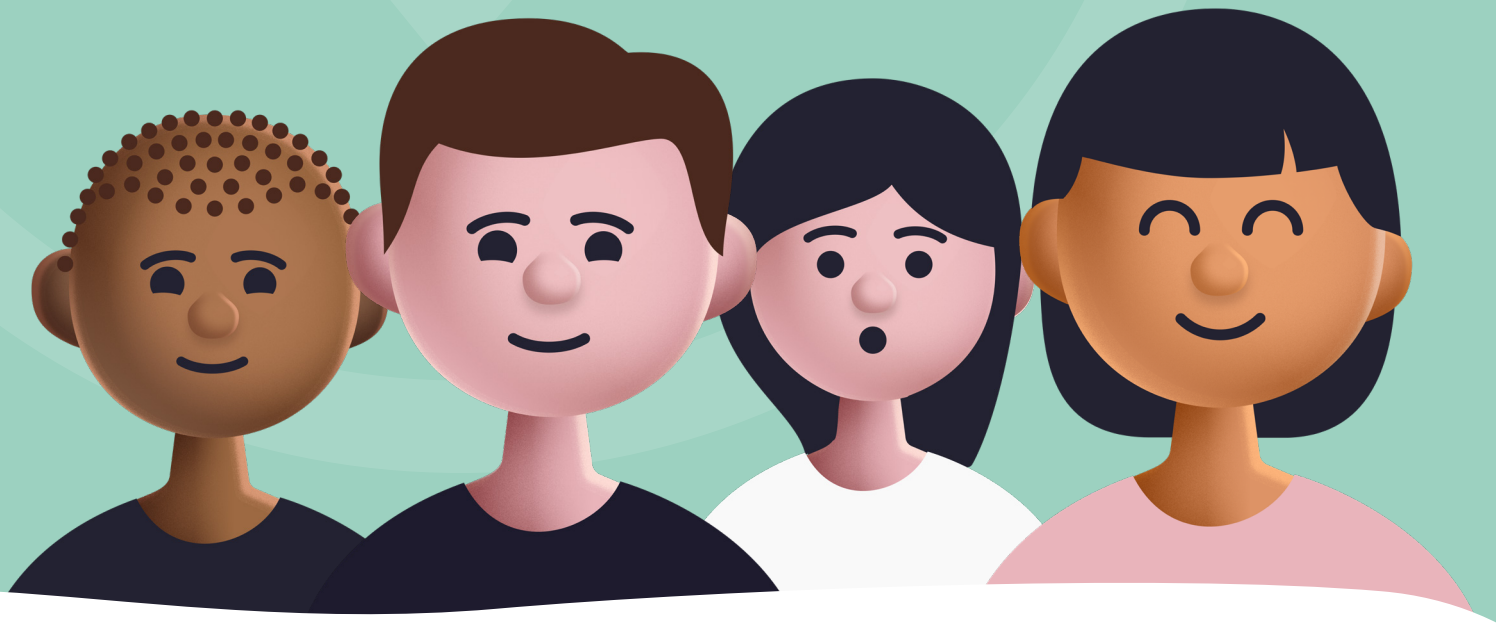

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