



# 香港兒童在線

# HONG KONG KIDS ONLINE



**Save the Children**  
救助兒童會



**HKU**  
*SWSA*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In many ways, children today are growing up in a different world than past generations. They are growing up online – in a digital world. They learn, hang out with friends, and share dreams about their future – all online. However, just as in the past, to give children the best chance of realizing the future of their dreams all of society must work to support their protection, opportunities to learn, and their health. For Save the Children this is at the core of everything we do, and Hong Kong Kids Online is a step forward in understanding how the digital era has significantly changed what parents, government, and society need to do to keep young people in Hong Kong safe and help them thrive.

Hong Kong has been at the forefront in the switch to a digital era, and our children have been at the leading edge of some areas of digital technology adoption in Hong Kong – online learning in particular. The evolution of the internet into a digital world full of resources and opportunities has surely brought many benefits and joys to young people across our city. Never before have such vast libraries, encyclopedias, multimedia entertainment and infinite access to people to meet and socialize with been at the fingertips of a young generation. But of

course, in the digital world as in the physical world, one can find both virtues and vices.

Save the Children Hong Kong commissioned The University of Hong Kong to conduct this study in primary and secondary schools from 2020 to 2021 in order to better understand the risks which children are exposed to online and determine the factors that help protect them in the digital world. We collected survey responses from more than 1,300 children from 16 different schools across the city and held interviews with students to understand their views and experiences. We used rigorous random sampling and statistical weighting techniques to ensure our analysis was representative of the majority of Hong Kong secondary school students and inclusive of children of various socio-economic backgrounds.

Our study reveals that an alarming number of Hong Kong's young people are encountering harmful and dangerous situations in the digital world. While the opportunities to support young people's healthy development on the internet are critical, ensuring safe access to those opportunities is a must. At present, it appears that many parents, teachers, and policy-makers are not adequately equipped

to do this job while youth themselves are also in need of good advice and safety guidance for their online activities. Meanwhile, amidst COVID-19 restrictions and school suspensions children are spending more time online and have been exposed to these dangers more often than in the past.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

For Save the Children, protecting the world's most vulnerable children is our priority. We are therefore especially concerned to discover that children who suffer neglect or abuse at home are significantly more likely to experience these harms online than their peers. Our study findings also suggest that children who are lonely, at risk of internet addiction, and who lack supportive guidance on internet use from their parents are more vulnerable to online harms than their peers.

Unwanted sexual content is reaching an alarming 40% of Hong Kong teenagers online. Much of this, young people told us, comes in the form of sexual or pornographic advertisements. It is not hard to imagine how upsetting this could be for a young person - especially if they have never encountered a nude image before, or if it happens often. Most alarming though, on average around 30 students at every secondary school in Hong Kong are estimated to have been pressured into some kind of unwanted online sexual activity last year.

Sexual harassment of children online is also a very serious concern affecting 1 in 10 teenagers last year, often times taking the form of requests for sexual photos. Although these forms of child sexual abuse are taking place in a digital world, young people can still feel their effects severely. At the same time, it seems likely that some of the sexual abuse and sexual harassment affecting youth online

is being perpetrated by their teenage peers. This means that both measures to protect children from threats as well as guidance on safe and respectful online conduct among peers, especially for teenagers, are crucial.

Bullying can be very harmful to children's wellbeing and development. Our study uncovered that children are equally likely to face bullying in the physical world and in the digital world, with about 1 in 5 teenagers facing cyberbullying. Beyond this, we found that those children who suffer this cruel treatment on school grounds often see the bullying follow them into the digital world, for example, at times when they should feel safe such as when playing video games at home.

These findings indicate that children face significant online safety risks, and that there is an immediate need for parents, schools, internet-based companies and the government to do more to support children and teens to navigate the digital world safely, and reduce the threats to their wellbeing. In contrast to the harms identified above, our study also found that 67% of teenagers learn new things online; 81% use the internet for social activities aside from social media and instant messaging every week or more often; and 40% are engaged in artistic and creative expression on the internet every month. These online activities serve children's core social and developmental needs and so those responsible for the protection of young children and teenagers need to ensure they can realize, without facing great risks, these important opportunities entitled to them in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some clear and important opportunities for the guardians of children to

take action to improve children's protection in the digital world.

**For government stakeholders and schools,** we recommend work be done to ensure that the relevant laws and policies create an environment that both empowers and protects young children and teenagers in the digital world. Hong Kong authorities should create a new role of child online safety commissioner and an independent body on eSafety to coordinate help-seeking and complaint mechanisms and to inform and create regulations, guidelines and public resources for safety in the digital world. The implementation of digital inclusion policies that ensure all children have effective access to the digital environment is also essential and will allow better equality of opportunities among children for advancing their learning and development. Existing laws as well as school policies need review and updating to better protect young children and teenagers from cyberbullying, online sexual exploitation, and abuse. Government authorities should also ensure that cybercrimes reporting and investigation mechanisms can provide timely and appropriate support for children while existing efforts to provide youth with outreach service via digital channels should see their capacity expanded.

**For parents and caregivers,** we note that children of parents who more often encourage their child to explore the internet and suggest ways for the child to stay safe online face fewer unwanted online sexual experiences on average. We recommend you find ways to stay engaged with your child's digital life and explore the internet safely together. Our study found that parents having rules for their children's internet

use and needing permission to do certain activities online is associated with a reduced risk of cyberbullying. Discuss the ground rules for using internet-connected devices. Find out how to block access to certain websites and content on devices used by your child when needed. The most important thing you can do is be present, listen, and offer support. If your child runs into problems in the digital world, take it seriously and reach out to professionals like school teachers or school social workers for guidance.

**For young children and teenagers,** we suggest you talk to your family about your online life. Your parents or caregivers will be interested and can give you good advice. There are many people that care about you. You should never hesitate to ask for help. For example, if you see something disgusting or upsetting on the internet, turn off the device and talk to a trusted adult. Be careful with making friendships online and talk to a trusted adult if someone you know online pressures you to do inappropriate things or bullies you with unpleasant messages or by using your photos in ways you don't like. Maintain a balance between your digital life and real-world life. Make sure you take care of your friendships, attend to your homework, eat healthily and get enough sleep. You should talk to a trusted adult if you have difficulty with spending too much time online or in games.

It is our hope that this study meaningfully advances dialogue and action to make the digital world safer for teenagers in Hong Kong. All children deserve to grow up in a safe environment supportive of their learning and development, whether that environment is in physical world seen by adults every day, or in the digital world of children and youth largely seen and experienced by them alone.

# KEY FINDINGS

Among Hong Kong secondary school students in the past year:

## ON UNWANTED ONLINE SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

- 4 in 10 have had at least one unwanted online sexual content exposure, solicitation, or experience. That means as many as 131,604 Hong Kong secondary school students were virtually “flashed” or sexually harassed at least once in the last year.
- Up to 5% were pressured into doing something sexual online against their will. That’s about 30 students in each secondary school.
- Online child sexual abuse has been a more prevalent threat than physical sexual abuse, affecting more teenagers earlier in life.

## ON CYBERBULLYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

- Roughly 10% were sexually harassed online, 4 times more than the number who reported being sexually harassed in real life. That means there were potentially 33,000 cases of online child sexual harassment last year.
- 1 in 20 had received unwanted requests for sexual photos of themselves.
- 1 in 5 experienced cyberbullying.
- Teenagers in Hong Kong were equally likely to experience cyberbullying as they were to experience bullying in real life and the majority of those bullied suffered this treatment in both the digital world and real life.

## ON SOCIAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT FROM THE INTERNET

- 67% learned new things online every week or more often.

- 81% used the internet for social activities every week, not including instant messaging or social media.
- 40% used the internet for artistic and creative expression at least every month.

## ON PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Children of parents who more often encourage their child to explore the internet and suggest ways for the child to stay safe on the internet face fewer unwanted online sexual experiences on average.
- Parents having rules for their children and children needing permission to do certain activities online is associated with a reduced risk of cyberbullying.
- Students who report that their school or teachers regularly guide them in internet education appear to less commonly face unwanted online sexual experiences, the worst forms of online child sexual abuse, and cyberbullying.

## ON RISK FACTORS

- Children who experienced abuse or neglect in real life were 4 times more likely than their peers to have unwanted sexual experiences online. Lonely children and those more dependent on the internet for socializing were also at significantly greater risk.
- Older children, specifically teenagers further into puberty, are more likely than younger children to face cyberbullying and online child sexual abuse. Additionally, boys are more likely than girls to face most kinds of online sexual abuse whereas the opposite is true for sexual abuse in the physical world.
- Behaviors indicating possible internet addiction were significantly associated with higher likelihood of facing online sexual abuse and cyberbullying.



## ABOUT THIS STUDY

Save the Children Hong Kong initiated this research in partnership with the University of Hong Kong to raise public awareness about the need to protect children online and how support them in navigating the opportunities and challenges they face in the digital world. We took the approach of getting a large random survey sample that was representative of the majority of the Hong Kong secondary school student population because we wanted to be able to estimate how common it was that teenagers in Hong Kong face harms online and how readily they benefit from some of the most important opportunities that the internet offers young people. We also collected responses from primary

school students to offer some insight into their experiences online. Our approach allowed us to get a reliable estimate of how many secondary school students in Hong Kong experience harms on the internet each year, especially different forms of child sexual abuse, and to understand the factors that can help children stay safe online. At the same time, it also allowed us to understand how the dangers on the internet compare with and relate to the dangers faced in the physical world so that parents, caregivers, and policy-makers can deepen their understanding of how those responsible for the protection of children need to adapt to doing so not only in the real world, but also in the digital world.

Our study uses the Global Kids Online research framework, which is an international research project that aims to generate and sustain a rigorous cross-national evidence base around children's use of the internet. The standardized study framework investigates children's experiences of opportunities, risks and protective factors in internet use. Our survey sample includes 1,097 responses from secondary school students

at 11 schools and 249 responses from primary school students at 5 schools while 11 secondary school students were reached through focus groups and interviews. Survey response data was collected between July 2020 and December 2021 and has been weighted to ensure statistical representativeness of the majority of the secondary school student population.

### Global Kids Online research around the world



*Hong Kong, Albania, Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Ghana, Montenegro, New Zealand, the Philippines, Serbia, South Africa, Uruguay, Canada, Costa Rica, India, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK*



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# THE DIGITAL LIVES OF HONG KONG YOUTH



Growing up today in Hong Kong and mostly anywhere else means growing up in a digital world. Very different from the lives and routines of their parents when they were children, children today depend on the digital world for many of their needs and joys. It is a place – a place they go to be with friends; to have fun; to learn new things; to entertain themselves when they feel bored; to be creative and pursue hobbies; to do their homework. It is a place they go to express their joys and frustrations. Their presence in the digital world is integrated with their presence

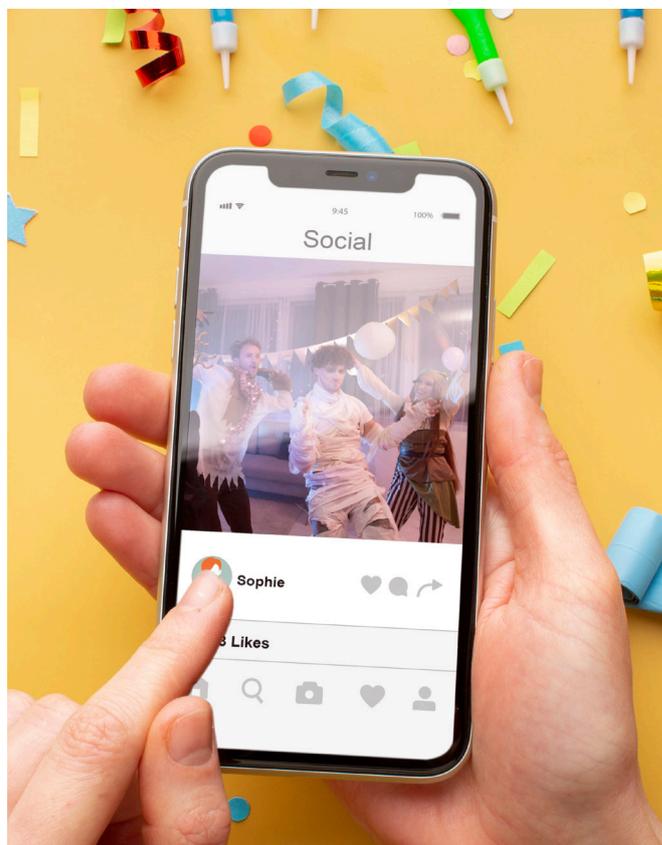
in the physical world and the line between the two is not as obvious or relevant as it may have been in the past. While the whole of society has been gripped by a pandemic, many young Hong Kongers have been forced to rely more on their digital lives for their social and educational needs. All of this means it is incredibly important to understand how children's digital lives relate to their protection, wellbeing, and opportunity to develop to their full potential.

## DIGITAL ROUTINES AND FAVOURITE PLACES IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Children participate in a variety of activities on the internet and they do so all throughout the day, most often connecting through a smartphone or tablet. But where do they go in the digital world? What kind of things do they do? When we asked teenagers what websites or apps they mostly use, YouTube came out as the most popular overall followed by WhatsApp, Google, and then Instagram. These platforms have a variety of functions and content which children can use them for, but in general these platforms most often used by teenager are primarily for entertainment, socializing, and exploring the internet to find or learn new things. Entertainment, socializing and learning are all important things for all children, entitled to them in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and supportive of their social development and wellbeing.

# 93%

of secondary school students in Hong Kong have their own profile on a social media or a gaming platform



The vast majority of secondary school students in Hong Kong (93%) have their own profile on a social media or a gaming platform. The most popular social media platform is Instagram, with 63% of Hong Kong's teens signed up, and the most popular online game is PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG). But even in the digital world sometimes boys and girls have different preferences, and some games and social media platforms are much more popular with one gender over the other while some appear to be almost exclusively used by one gender. This accidental gender segregation of online spaces raises questions about how boys and girls experience the internet differently, and how this might lead to them being influenced differently or given different kinds of development and learning opportunities.

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Some of the most common activities children carry out on the internet are things that are beneficial to their personal development and that satisfy the important social needs everyone has. Among Hong Kong secondary school students, 67% learn new things online at least every week and 40% use the internet to express themselves creatively in any given month, making and sharing things like music, videos, blogs and stories.

# 40%

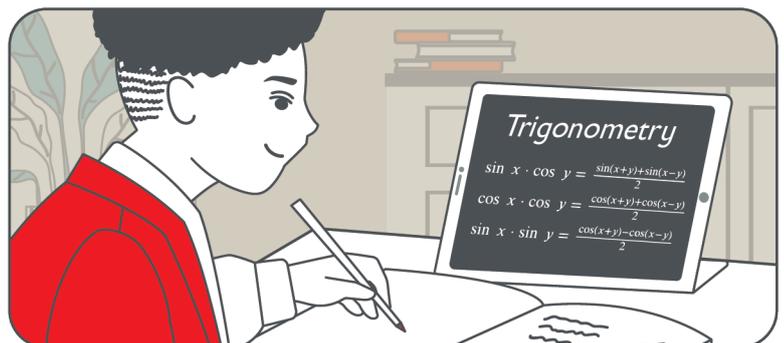
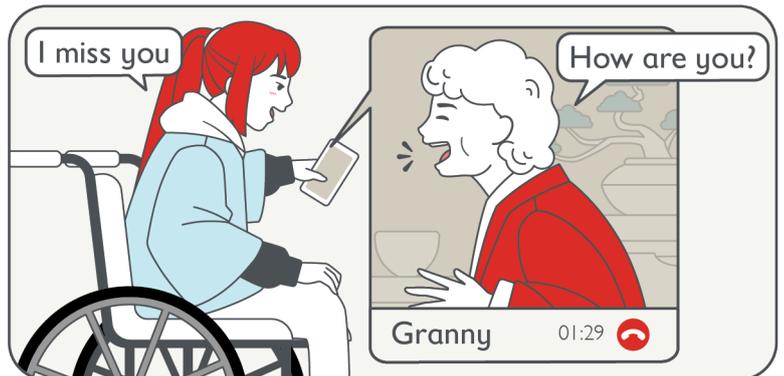
of secondary school students use the internet for **creative and artistic expression** in any given month



*"I like to do drawings. It's hard to come up with ideas for drawings on my own. Sometimes I search for new ideas online."*

- Boy, form 2

But unfortunately, not all young people in Hong Kong have equal access to the opportunities offered by the internet. The digital divide was apparent in our survey results and on average, secondary school students from households with lower socio-economic status are less likely to regularly learn new things online and less likely to regularly use the internet for creative activities. This might be related to limited access to devices and adequate internet bandwidth but might also be explained by differences in the online habits and activities that are learned or encouraged by parents and schools.



## MEETING FRIENDS ONLINE

Social interaction and connectedness to others are core needs everyone has, regardless of age. Children frequently use the internet to satisfy these needs, with as many as 81% of secondary school students using the internet for social activities every week in the last month, not including instant messaging or social media.

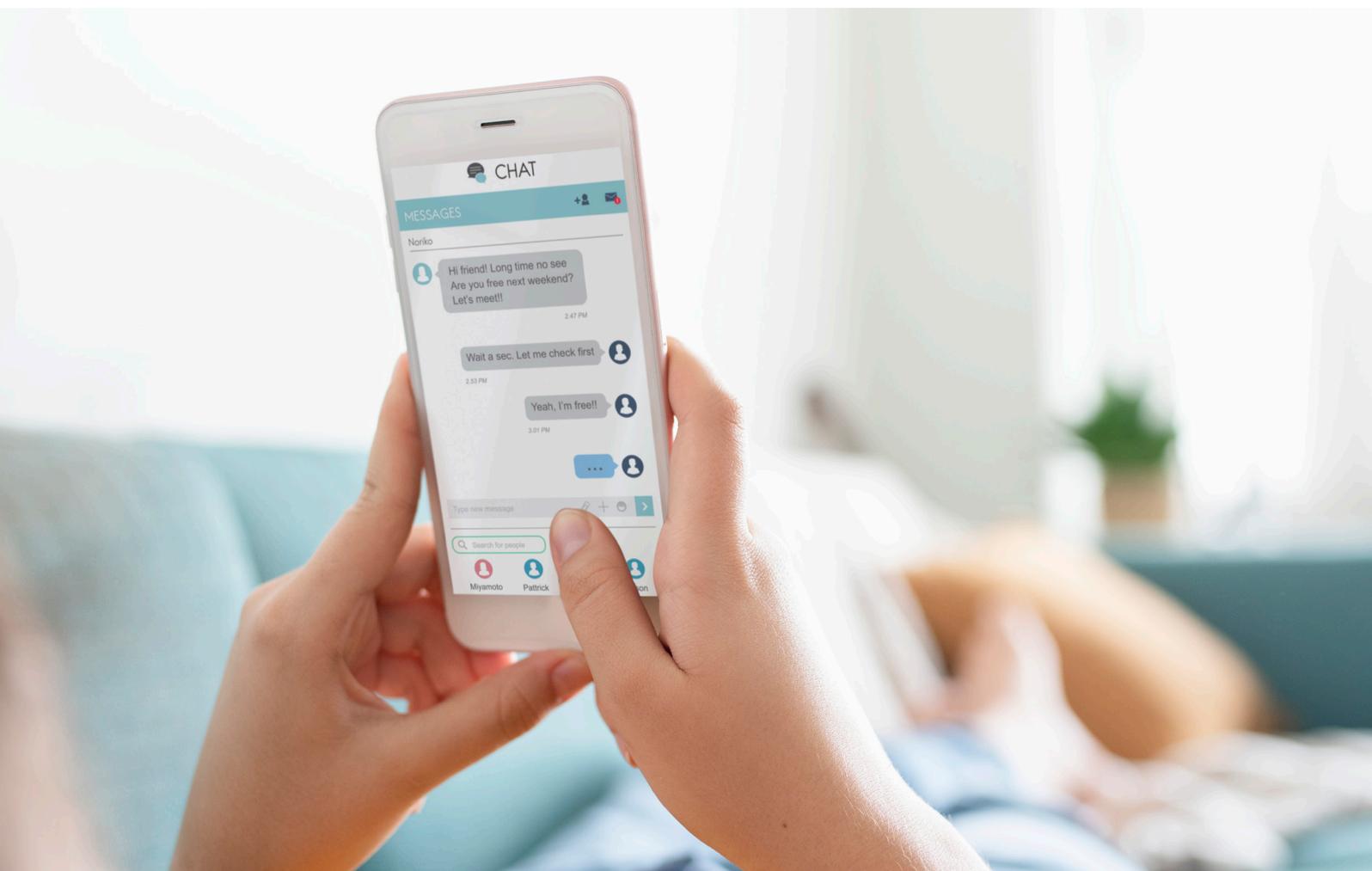
*"I get to know current affairs better and I can discuss with other people about it, which helps shorten the distance between us."*

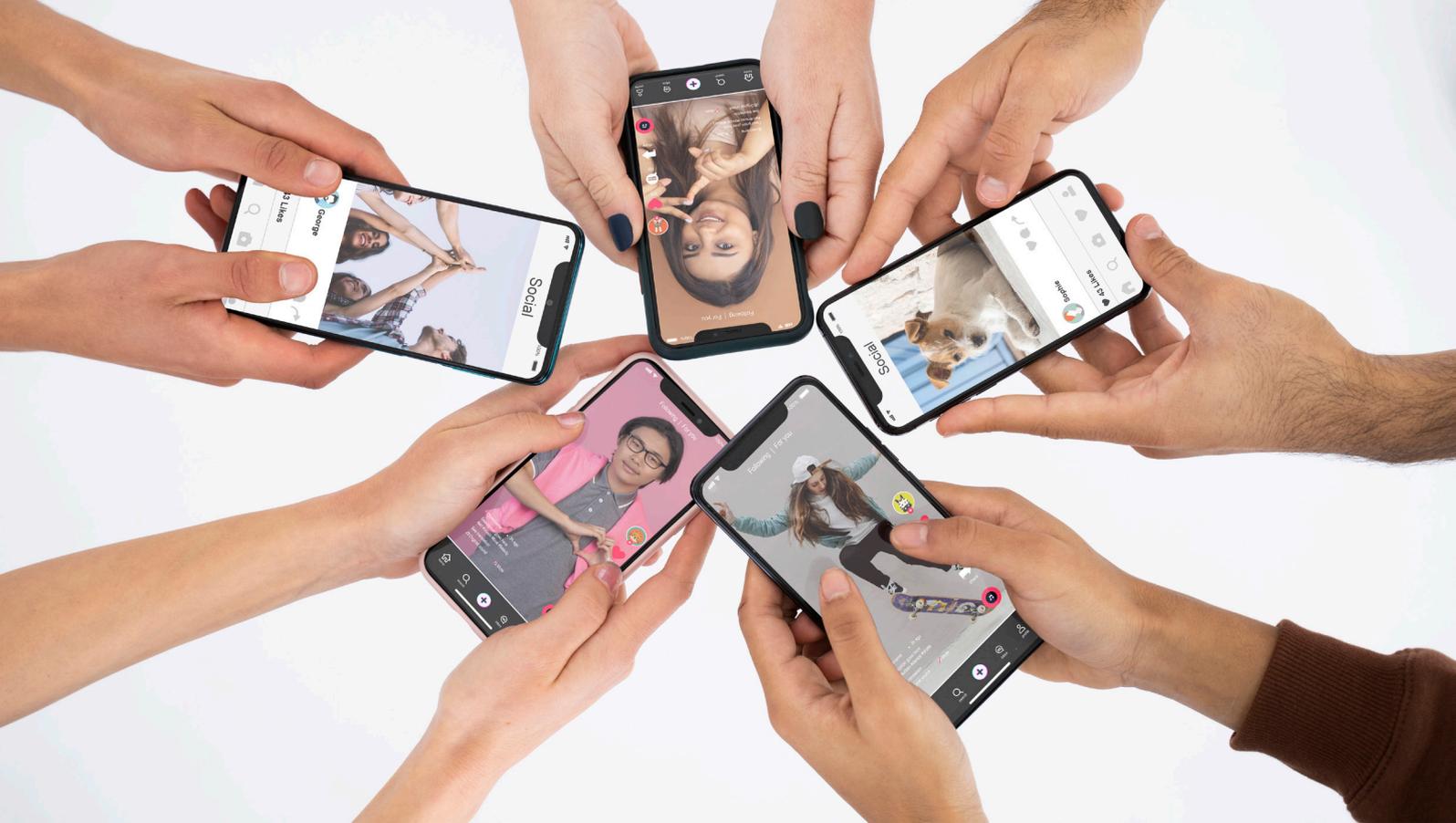
- Girl, form 2

*"Communicating in real life one easily runs out of topics, but when communicating online, I can search what people are talking about on the internet at the same time."*

- Boy, form 2

The digital world is an essential social space for teenagers, and meeting people online is common among Hong Kong's youth. Teenagers regularly connect online with others they already know in the real world as well as those they have never met face-to-face. Some young people even told us that they find it more comfortable to communicate with their classmates online than in real life.





**44%**

of teenagers **had contact** on the internet with someone they have not met face-to-face before



**13%**

of teenagers **met someone face-to-face** that they first got to know on the internet

Among those secondary school students responding to our survey, 27% looked for new friends on the internet at least every month in the past year and 13% even met their online friends in real life, with the majority saying it was a positive experience.

Using the internet for some kinds of learning, creative and social activities could contribute to children developing their self-esteem, and even

further their journey towards self-actualization by fostering their creative abilities and sense of acceptance by their peers. Growing up with regular access to the internet might even contribute to young people developing broader perspectives and more informed world views, as 33% of teenagers we surveyed had used the internet to talk to people from places or backgrounds different from their own.

## ONLINE GAMING

# 31%

of Hong Kong secondary students play online games almost every day or multiple times throughout the day



Online games, often played on smart phones, are an important part of the digital world for many young people in Hong Kong. As much as 31% of Hong Kong secondary students play online games almost every day or multiple times throughout the day. Many of the most popular games are live multiplayer games which allow for chat and interaction with other players joining from locations across Hong Kong and the world. While in the past it was often thought that video

games are more appealing to boys, today in Hong Kong we find that a roughly equal portion of secondary school girls and boys are playing games online almost every day or more often.

From what teenagers told us in interviews, they generally see online games as a positive activity that brings them mental, learning, and social benefits. For example, teenagers told us that engaging in online games is very important for their entertainment and helps them reduce the stress they feel from their studies and social life. Teenagers described how online games usually require a lot of time and effort to develop their skills and to achieve a good status in their games. Some young people we spoke to would search online to learn how to improve their skills in online games, and spend time practicing and improving. When they had finally reached a good status in their games, it gave these young people a sense of achievement after spending significant effort on study and practice.



Some online games require players to support each other as a team towards the same goal. According to our conversations with young people, interactions with other online gamers that they do not know in real life is common. Teenagers told us that these interactions in games help them learn to be better team players, even outside the digital world. Some shared that by having the opportunity to meet gamers from all over the world, they had the chance to practice their language and communication skills.

*“Games, for example, help me practice my verbal skills. If I am paired with Hong Konger in the game, I can practice my verbal skills, and if I am paired with Mainlander or a Taiwanese player who always speaks Mandarin, I can practice Mandarin. Likewise with foreigners I will speak English so I can practise my English. [Online gaming] helps me improve my English.”*

*- Boy, form 3*

But of course, there can be too much of a good thing, and many parents and teens know already that there is an important need for balance between time spent online and time spent with family and on important real-world activities. 41% of students we spoke to face complaints from family members for spending too much time online and nearly a third of all teenagers we

surveyed admitted they regularly lose their temper or face conflict with family members over limits on their time on the internet. However, the majority of secondary school students we consulted (62%) said they have no issue with time limits on their internet use.

*“Excluding time I spent on sleeping, having meals, and school, I almost spend all my time on my smartphone.”*

*- Boy, form 2*

The digital world is a broad and diverse landscape where children are actively exploring and engaging with their peers. While it is an important aspect of their lives today and holds many opportunities for them, there are also many risks and dangers just as those they can face in the real world. But the vastness of digital places they can visit, a whole world of people at their virtual doorstep, and the speed at which communication and sharing of videos and photos can take place means that some of life’s dangers may be more commonly encountered when they go online.



# ONLINE SAFETY



Cybersecurity might be a familiar word for young people in Hong Kong. Our study found that there are some potential cybersecurity risks for children when looking at how they behave and manage privacy on the internet.

*"I will not add strangers [to my social media account] who I don't know from real life."*

*- Boy, form 2*

*"I will not visit any website with a suspicious website link. I don't want my computer to get virus."*

*- Boy, form 2*

## 86%

of secondary school students **have at least basic online safety knowledge**



Know how to change privacy settings. (E.g., on a social networking site)



Find it easy to check if the information online is true.



Know which information one should and shouldn't share online.



Know how to remove people from contact lists.



Know how to change share content accessibility. (E.g., friends, everyone)

"[To avoid getting advertisements on YouTube] I adjust my age in my YouTube profile to be very young, like 8 or 6 years old. This way there are less ads. Other people share these strategies online."

- Girl, form 2

"I use a VPN [to] hide my IP address. So others don't know my real IP address."

- Boy, form 2

"I change my pass-codes from time to time. For instance, my phone PIN."

- Boy, form 2

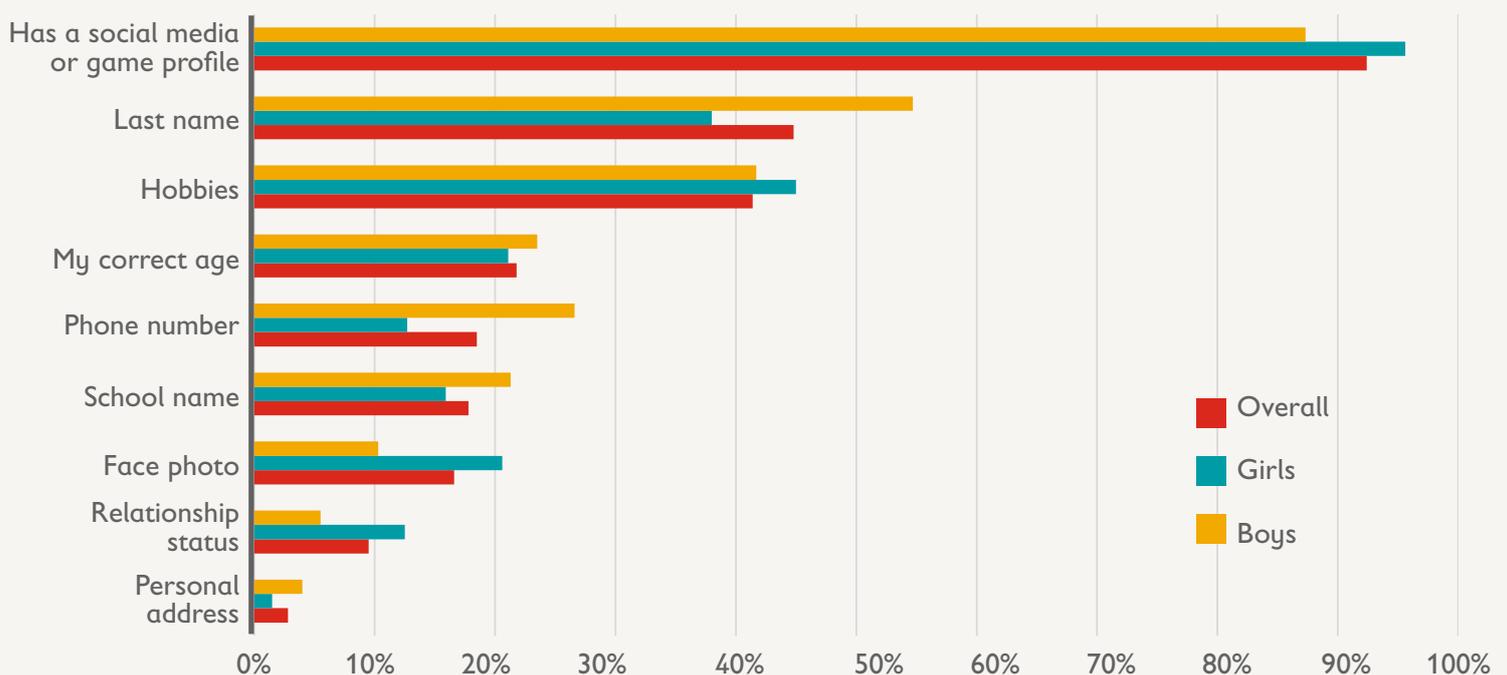
The majority of teenagers in our study (86%) reported that they have at least basic knowledge of online safety. Meanwhile, we found that at least 31% of secondary school students across Hong Kong have personally identifiable information on their social media accounts (clear photo of face, phone number, or home address). This information children share online might increase their vulnerability to online risks.

31%

of secondary school students have personally identifiable information on their social media accounts



### What kind of personal information do teenagers share on their online profiles?



# CYBERBULLYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT



## CYBERBULLYING

Bullying is a harmful behavior that can take the form of hurtful comments, physical or verbal aggression, or other acts of intimidation. Children might bully each other at school and in the playground, but when the acts take place in the digital world, it is known as “cyberbullying”. It can happen on social media, in instant messaging

apps, or in online games. It might involve receiving messages that are intentionally intimidating or use of images and videos of the victim in ways that cause humiliation. For avid gamers, with voice chat being a common feature in online games, it could involve verbal aggression or threats, and even theft of virtual possessions within online games.

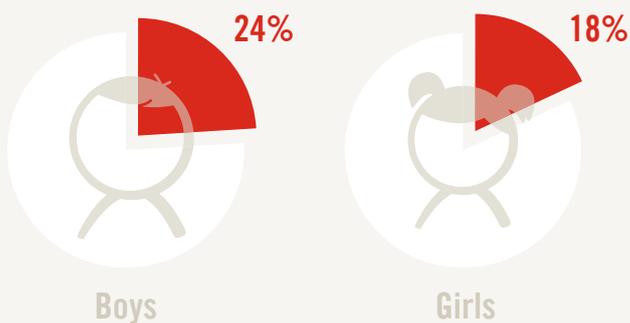
# 1 in 5

secondary school students  
in Hong Kong **experienced  
cyberbullying** in the last year



1 in 5 secondary school students in Hong Kong experienced cyberbullying in the last year. The experience is more common for boys, with 24% having experienced cyberbullying in the past year compared to 18% of girls. Bullying of any kind is very concerning because it can have many negative consequences for a child, including impacts on their development and mental health.

### Teenagers who experienced cyberbullying in the past year



Cyberbullying is more common among older children in Hong Kong, and appears to be more common among avid online gamers. Children who had internet usage habits that appear synonymous

with internet addiction were also much more likely to experience cyberbullying. In particular, children who frequently used online games and reported more or less continuous internet use throughout the day, whether at home alone or when out on their way somewhere, were significantly more likely to also be dealing with bullies online.

Yet, it might not be only that more time spent on the internet, or more time spent in online games, means cyberbullying experiences are more likely. Among young people we spoke to, those who are frequent users of certain popular online games (Arena of Valor and Clash of Clans) were more likely to experience cyberbullying, while frequent users of other popular online games (like Minecraft and PUBG) did not experience cyberbullying more commonly than others. This means that there is likely an important role for video game companies to play in protecting young children and teenagers in the digital world by curating a game environment more protected from cyberbullying.

*“I hope people can be more conscientious when they leave comments online and pay better attention to whether or not their words are appropriate.”*

*- Boy, form 2*

The experiences of cyberbullying can be varied. Outside of online gaming, several of the teens we interviewed referred to manipulation of their photos and videos, or the use of photos and videos of themselves on social media in a hurtful way and without their consent.

*“Sometimes when you post a selfie on [WeChat] Friends’ Circle. Other people will download your photo and make a meme out of it.”*

*- Girl, form 2*

About 7% of teenagers we surveyed had faced this kind of cyberbullying, which has the potential to be very humiliating and drag on for a long time as the hurtful “meme” images are shared again and again and can live forever in digital spaces. Children in Hong Kong are equally likely to experience cyberbullying as they are to experience bullying in real life. For many young people this means they can never escape the schoolyard bullying, it follows them home and into the digital world where they spend their free time.



## ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL HARASSMENT

When we leave our homes and go out into the street, we do not expect to encounter unwanted sexual comments or requests for naked photos of ourselves, nor would we tolerate this if it happened. Yet, for an alarming number of teenagers in Hong Kong this is part of how they experience the digital world.

The term sexual harassment is more often used to describe experiences of adults than it is used to describe experiences of children. But sexual harassment of children can happen at school, in public, or on the internet. Sexual harassment includes any form of unwanted sexual communication that violates a person's dignity, and such acts are a form of child sexual abuse and an attack on a child's human right to dignity.



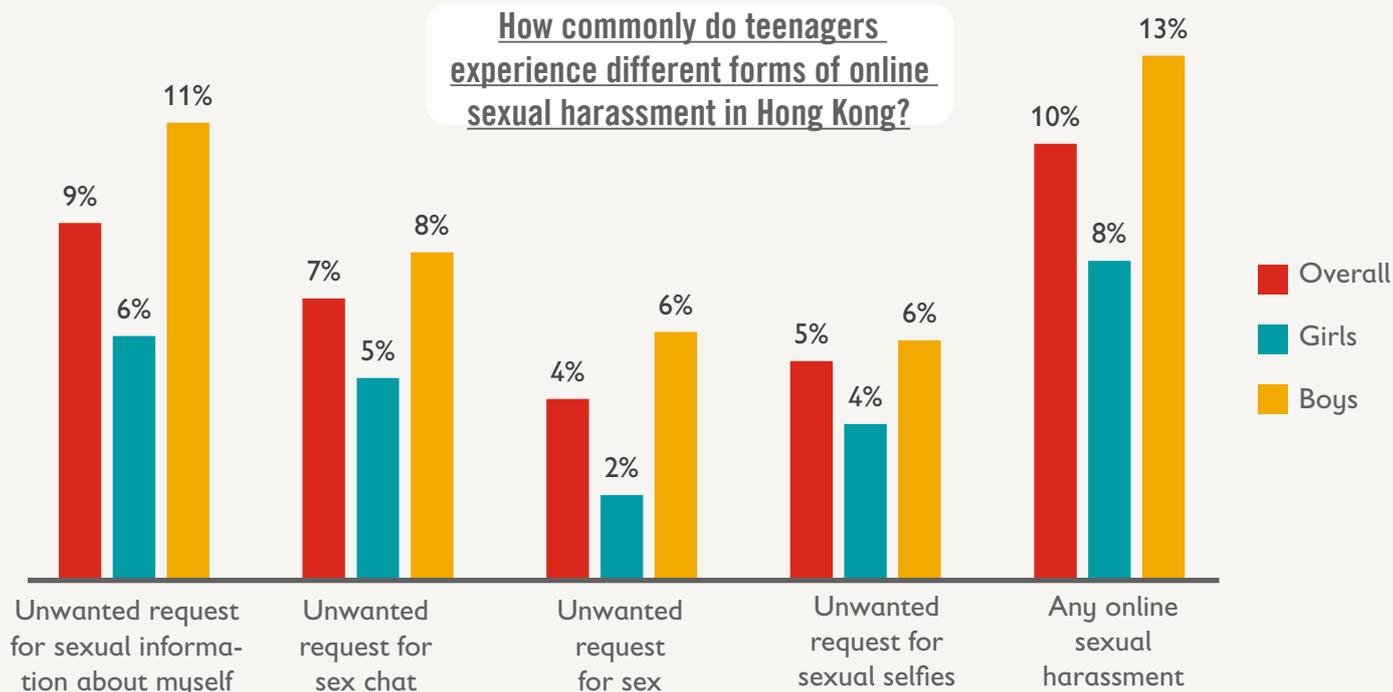
# 1 in 10

secondary school students in Hong Kong experienced sexual harassment online in the last year

**POTENTIALLY 33,000 CASES**

Roughly 1 in 10 secondary school students in Hong Kong experienced sexual harassment online in the last year. This includes unwanted sexual messages or comments, unwanted requests for sexual selfies, and unwanted sexual solicitations. This means that as many as 33,000 teenagers in Hong Kong likely experienced online sexual harassment at least once in 2021. On average, secondary school students from lower socio-economic status households are almost twice as likely to have experienced sexual harassment on the internet in the past year compared to other teenagers.

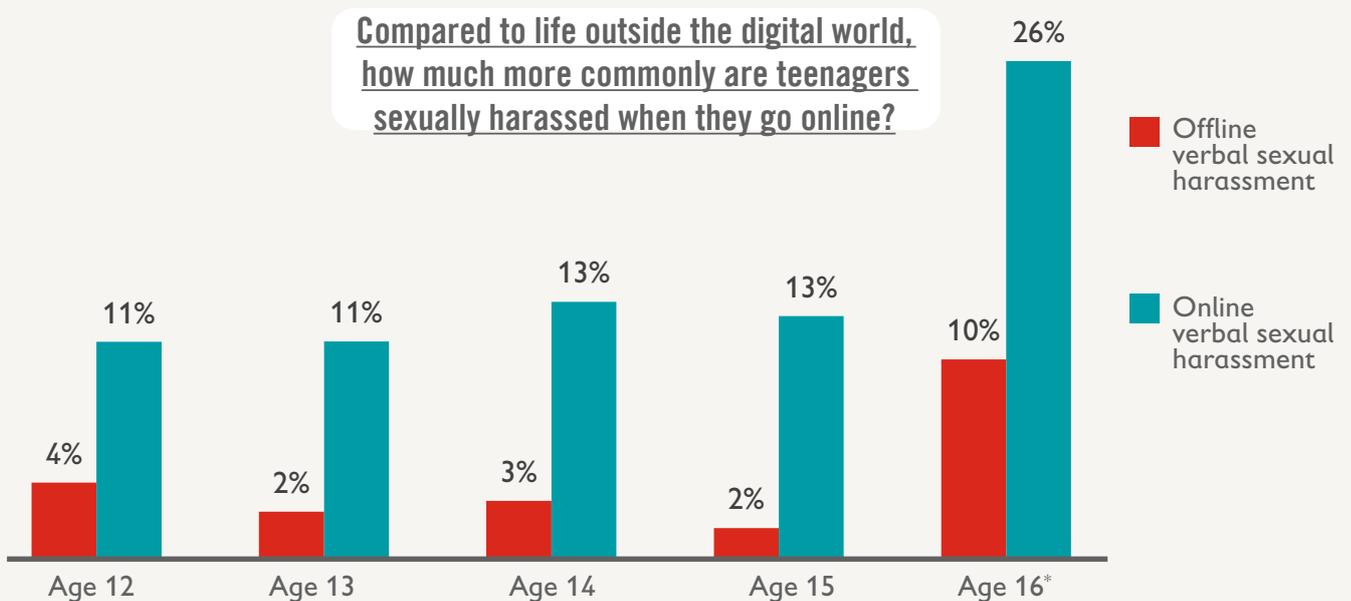
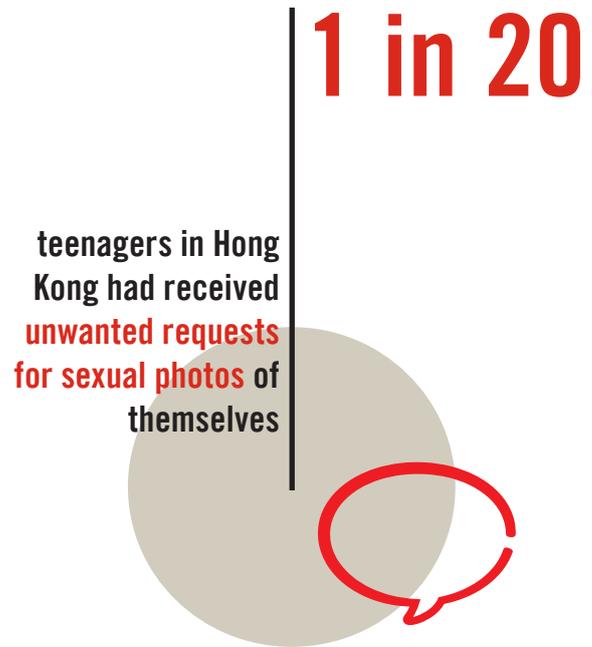
How commonly do teenagers experience different forms of online sexual harassment in Hong Kong?



What's particularly concerning is that this is affecting children as young as 12 years old, while any child is roughly 4 times more likely to experience sexual harassment on the internet than in real life. While some of the online child sexual harassment may be from adult sexual predators, there is good reason to believe that children's peers are also perpetrators as 7% of secondary school students in our sample admitted to sending these kinds of messages to others.

This demonstrates how much more common it can be for young people to face dangers in the digital world and how important it is for children's sexual education to include guidance on behaviors online. Experiencing online sexual harassment becomes more common as children get older and further into puberty. Young people growing up in the digital world are experiencing puberty

in different ways from past generations and those responsible for their sexual education and protection might not be adequately equipped to guide them through puberty in their digital lives.



\* Our study contained a relatively smaller sample of 16 year olds so findings for this age group are less certain

# THE GREATEST THREATS TO CHILDREN IN THE DIGITAL WORLD



## CYBERFLASHING

1 in 5

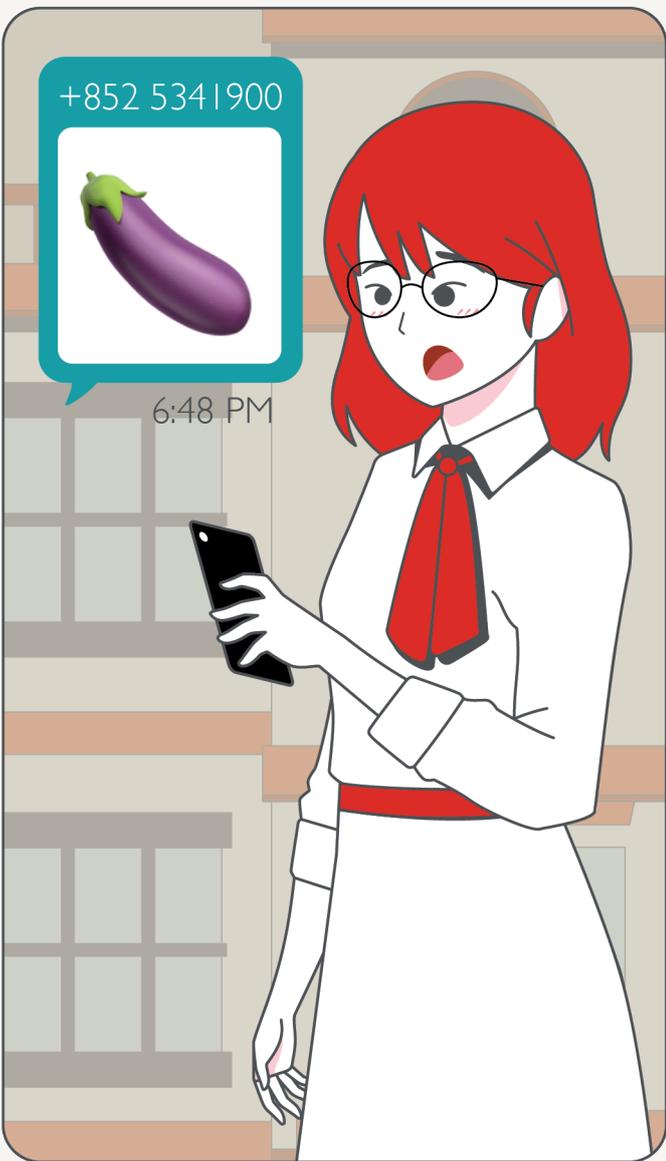
Hong Kong teenagers were **cyberflashed** in the digital world last year



Cyberflashing is the act of sending an unwanted nude (sometimes personal) genital image to someone else, for example via a messaging app. When carried out against children, it can leave them feeling ashamed, violated and intimidated. It could be especially upsetting if it is the first time that they have seen a naked image and for

younger children. While only 1 in 100 teenagers in Hong Kong reported being flashed in real life, as many as 1 in 5 reported being cyberflashed in the digital world in the last year. That is as many as 72,000 teenagers receiving at least one online message containing unwanted nude and pornographic images in the last year.

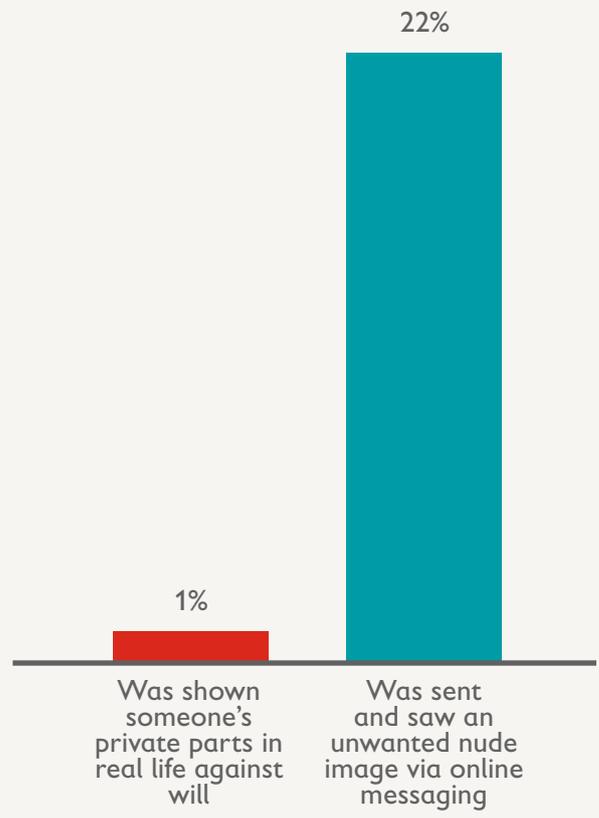
*“Receiving d\*\*\* pics is quite common among pretty girls.”*  
 - Anonymous secondary school student<sup>1</sup>



1 [Young Voices: Insights from Young People in Hong Kong.](#)

Even more worrying, according to the youth we spoke to it may often be that teenagers are sending their own nude and genital photos to their peers. This means that not only are teenagers perpetrating this kind of sexual abuse of their classmates, but they are also self-producing child pornography and disseminating it in the digital world where it may remain forever.

Compared to life outside the digital world, how much more commonly are teenagers being flashed online?



Getting flashed is

**22x** more common in the digital world



## CHILDREN AND TARGETED PORNOGRAPHY ADVERTISING

The digital world is a place traversed both by adults and by children. Internet-based businesses and advertisers know this, but have often been criticized for their failure to protect children from adult content on their platforms. The scale of this problem is enormous, with 38% of secondary school students in Hong Kong being reached with pornographic advertisements within the last year.

NEARLY

# 2 out of 5



Hong Kong teenagers are reached by sexual content advertisers each year

Considering that online advertising typically involves precision targeting of individuals based on age, gender, and online behaviors such as websites or apps most frequently used, the fact that sexual content advertisers paid to reach as many as 125,000 teenagers in Hong Kong last year raises serious questions about the legality of the activities of these businesses. It also implies that some of the biggest and most popular apps and internet-based companies are complicit in the

presentation of pornographic advertisements to an astounding number of children.

*“Some video websites have many advertisements with indecent content, there are about 5 indecent advertisements in a 20-minute-long video with 10 advertisements.”*

- Girl, form 2

*“Inappropriate contents like... there could be a naked woman in the ad with her boobs bouncing.”*

- Girl, form 2

*“Sometimes I don't wear earphones when watching videos. Once these inappropriate advertisements suddenly started to play and it was very loud and everyone could hear. I felt very embarrassed.”*

- Girl, form 2

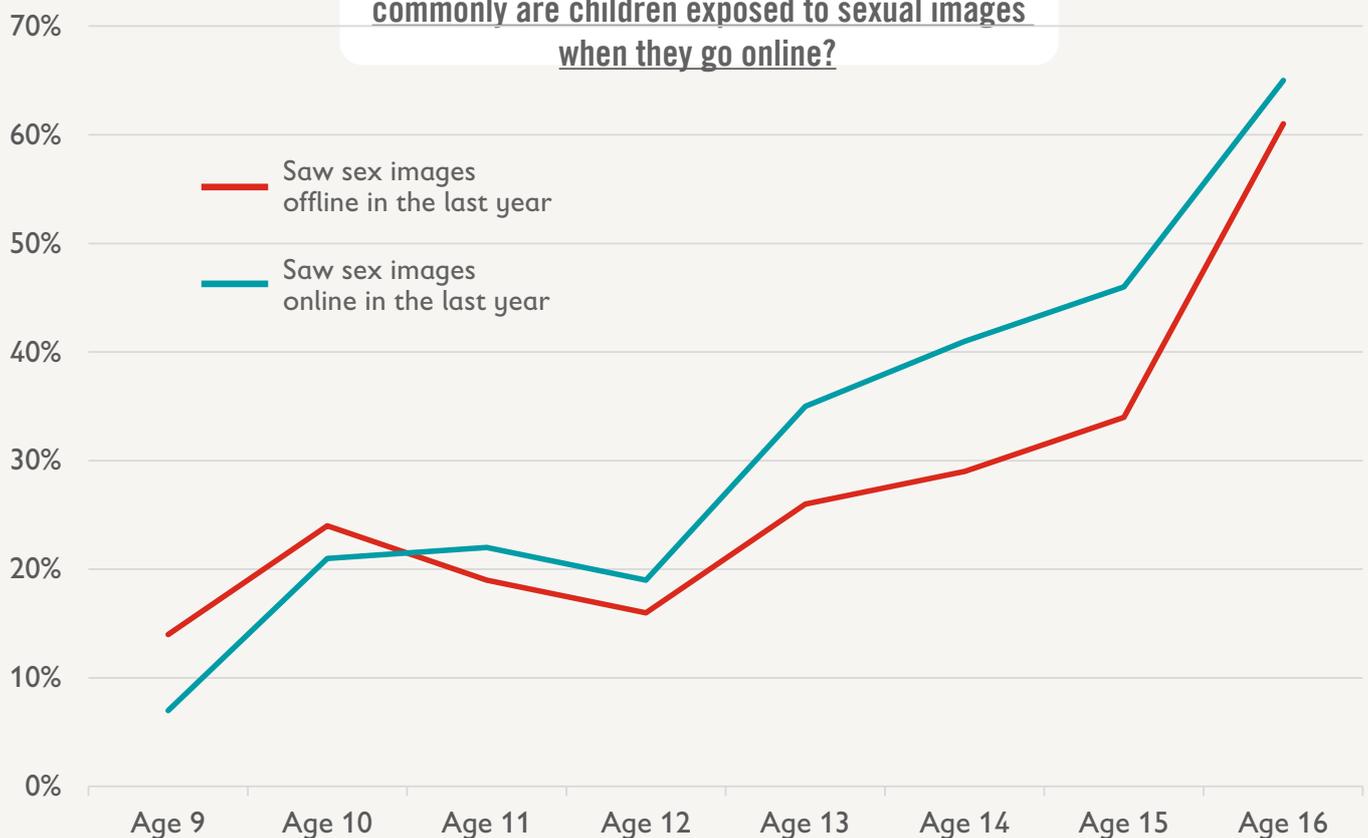
*“Some videos are not suitable for young people and the website will ask the viewers to declare their age. But you can lie about your age, saying you are over 18 years old. So there is really no way to protect the young people from this adult content.”*

- Boy, form 2



Perhaps the most worrying finding is that even primary school students we surveyed reported being reached with sexual images online. As children age, they are increasingly likely to be reached with unwanted pornographic content, potentially causing them a great deal of distress on a regular basis. While pornographic content has long been available in the real world, it is somewhat more pervasive in children's digital world. It appears that by as early as age 11, children are more likely to be exposed to sexual images online than in real life. This means that in comparison to the pre-internet era, more children are now being exposed to sexual images earlier in their childhood.

**Compared to life outside the digital world, how commonly are children exposed to sexual images when they go online?**



## ONLINE “FRIENDS”

For young people, meeting someone online that they do not know in their real-life might be giving them opportunities to know a person that shares their hobbies and interests. This opportunity for connection may be really important for a youth stuck at home or feeling lonely at school. However, the people children meet online are not always who they appear to be and children may not always know how to stay safe amongst anonymous online friends.

While the vast majority of persons that children will meet online may be their peers and classmates, contact with strangers online can be the greatest threat to children online because sometimes those

*“While playing online games, I communicate with people I don’t know in reality. The game is not a dating app, but can help players meet other players when we play the game.”*

- Boy, form 2

*“Some of them [online game players] are already aged twenty or thirty something. We are middle school students. Sometimes I feel that it’s actually quite dangerous. But as long as we don’t disclose our personal information, I guess its fine.”*

- Boy, form 2

### Which behaviors with online “friends” are more common? (Rank)

- 01 / Looked for new friends or contacts on the internet
- 02 / Added people to my friends or contacts I have never met face-to-face
- 03 / Pretended to be a different kind of person online from who I really am
- 04 / Sent a photo or video of myself to someone I have never met face-to-face
- 05 / Sent my personal information (e.g., my full name, address or phone number) to someone I have never met face-to-face

online “friends” have the worst intentions and subject children to online child sexual exploitation.

Some children told us that they are extra cautious about meeting strangers online, and a number of teenage girls we spoke to were quite confident that they know they should reject friend requests from “strange uncles” and that these older men approaching them had bad intentions like asking them out to have sex, asking them for nude selfies or asking them about selling their school uniforms. Still, it appears that in the last year almost half (44%) of Hong Kong young people have communicated with people online that they do not know in real life.

**44%**



**Hong Kong teenagers have communicated with people online that they don't know in real life**

*“I play Identity V, there is a channel in the game for players to chat...I saw people looking for teenage girls there and want to make them their girlfriends. It has something to do with...some player says their conversations include some erotic content.”*

*- Boy, form 3*

*“There was a stranger saying he could give me \$1,000 to be his friend. I blocked him immediately. There were also strangers approaching me through WhatsApp, WeChat, and Instagram. They kept asking me to be their girlfriend. It's really scary as I did not know how they found me online and what will they do to me.”*

*- Anonymous secondary school student<sup>2</sup>*



2 [Young Voices: Insights from Young People in Hong Kong.](#)



## 1 in 20

teenagers in Hong Kong have likely experienced online child sexual exploitation in the past year

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse, and involves the coercion or encouragement of a child to engage in any sexual or pornographic activities. Abusers typically hold some power or influence over the child, and use that power for sexual gratification, or for profiting monetarily, or benefiting socially from the sexual exploitation of the child. Young people can be

the perpetrators, as well as the victims, of child sexual exploitation. From our survey of youth, we discovered that as many as 1 in 20 teenagers in Hong Kong have likely experienced this in the past year. That means roughly 30 students in each Hong Kong secondary school may have been coerced into sexual acts on the internet at least once in the last year. From what teenagers told us in interviews, it seems that their student peers are sometimes the perpetrators, with trends like teenage couples pressuring each other to “share nudes” reportedly common among today’s teens.



# WHICH CHILDREN ARE MORE AT RISK?

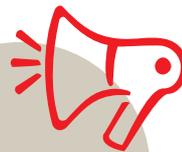
We reviewed a wide range of possible factors that can put a young people more at risk of experiencing cyberbullying or different kinds of online sexual abuse. As many as 4 out of every 10 secondary school students have had at least one unwanted online sexual content exposure, solicitation, or experience in the last 12 months.



So what is it that puts those children at more risk than their peers?

**4** out of every **10**

secondary school students have had at least one unwanted online sexual content exposure, solicitation, or experience in the last 12 months



THAT'S AS MANY AS  
**131,604**  
STUDENTS

## Neglected and abused children

Overall our findings suggest that neglected children are some of those facing the highest risk of all forms of harm in the digital world. Children who reported being neglected by their caregivers at home, or having faced any kind of physical or sexual abuse in real life were much more likely to face sexual abuse and bullying online. In fact, children who experienced abuse

or neglect are 4 times more likely to have unwanted online sexual experiences. About 9% of children in Hong Kong are estimated to have experienced neglect in the past year, and those teenagers experiencing neglect from their parents or caregivers are probably more likely to seek out compassion and acceptance from online “friends”, some of whom may have harmful intentions.

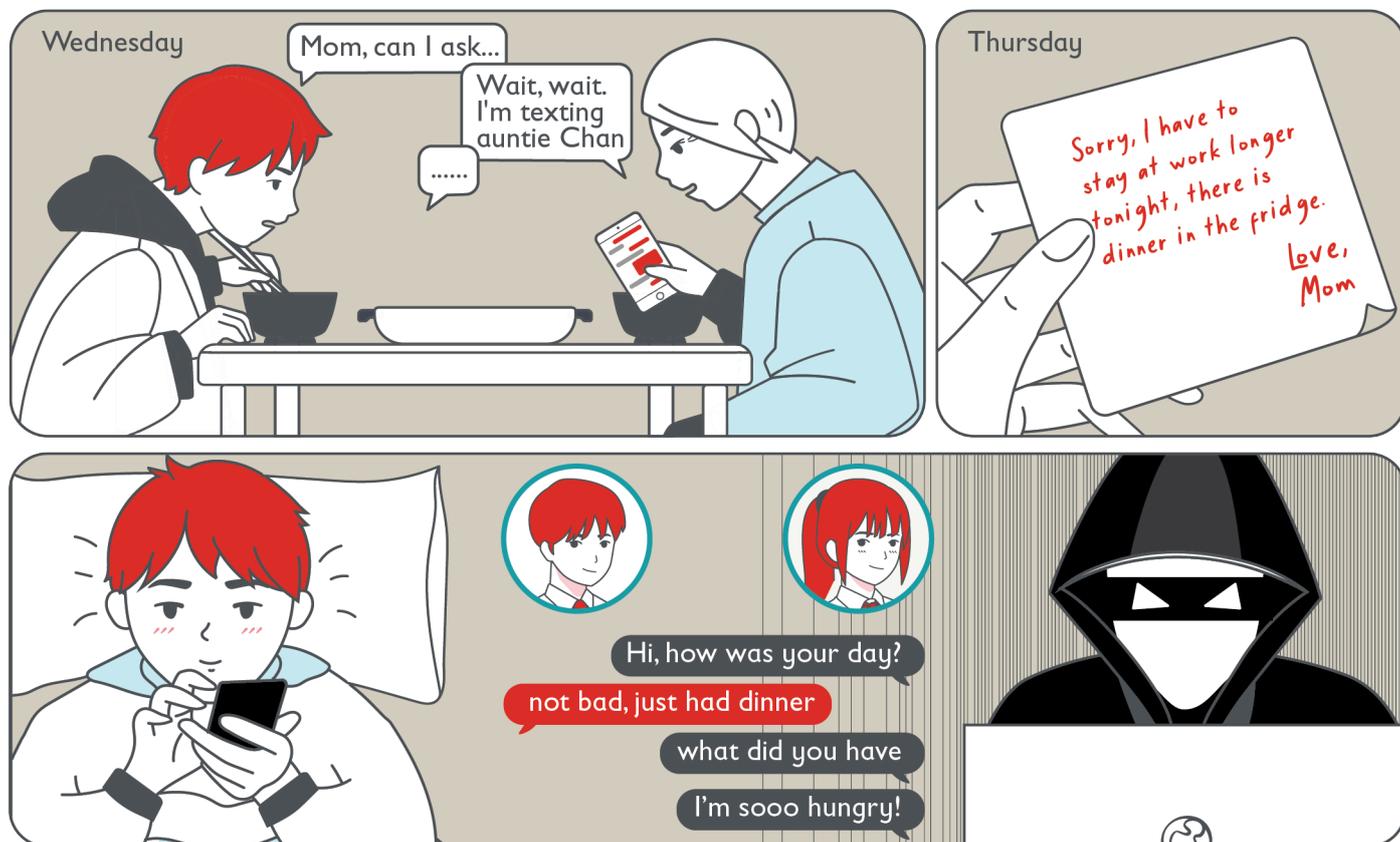
## Lonely children

Children who had online behaviors that indicate a higher level of dependency on the internet for meeting their core social needs were more commonly facing some form of child sexual abuse online and cyberbullying. For example, young people who shared more personal information on their social media profiles, such as their relationship status, their hobbies, and their correct age were significantly more likely than their peers to experience harm in the digital world. Having this information on their profile may or may not be risky, but the act of sharing extra personal details on their social media profile could indicate that the child is more desperate to make friends online. However, living their social

lives primarily online has been the only option for many children amidst regular school closures and social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that young people looking for new friends online, and having any kind of communication with strangers online were also significantly more likely to experience online child sexual abuse. Children with these behaviors seem less likely to distrust strangers and less cautious about sharing and interacting with them in the digital world.

*“The victims are usually alone at home...they believe those online chat apps could help have a better life, because they want to have people accompany them.”*

*- Anonymous secondary school student<sup>4</sup>*



4 [Young Voices: Insights from Young People in Hong Kong.](#)

## Older children and boys

Older children, specifically teenagers further into puberty, are more likely than younger teenagers to face cyberbullying and online child sexual abuse. Additionally, boys are more likely than girls to face most kinds of online sexual abuse whereas the opposite is true for sexual abuse in the physical world. The reasons for this are not all known, but it seems likely that it is at least in part related to the kind of activities older children and teen boys in particular sometimes engage in with each other, such as discovering their sexuality and sexual bullying.

## Internet-addicted children

Some of the children we surveyed reported nearly continuous use of the internet throughout the

day; very often being on the internet when alone at home, while traveling, and in public. These behaviors indicating possible internet addiction were significantly associated with higher likelihood of facing online sexual abuse and cyberbullying. Additionally, children who reported the most frequent use of online games also appeared to be at greater risk of cyberbullying and it seems likely that online-gaming, internet-addiction, and cyberbullying are experienced together. Interviews with young people found that many were strongly incentivized to dedicate a lot of time and effort to their online game accounts while some also reported being tricked or treated unfairly in online games. For secondary school students who use the internet while traveling everyday 44% of them were bullied online in the past year, compared to just 20% of secondary school students overall.



# GUARDIANS IN

# THE DIGITAL WORLD



## WHEN CHILDREN NEED HELP IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Children can regularly feel upset, scared, or bothered by things that happen in their daily lives. The same is true for their daily lives on the internet. The parents of most children in our study have a certain level of engagement with their

child's online safety. Yet, only some young people reported that they would tell a friend (52%) or parent (20%) if something distressing happened to them online. What is more worrying is that, when it comes to upsetting and unwanted sexual experiences or exposure online, most children responding said they did not tell anyone about it, presumably because they are ashamed or too shy

to talk about unwanted sexual experiences with others.

Most young people taking our survey who had had an unwanted online sexual experience chose not to tell us whom they told about it. Of those who answered this question, the most common response was that they told no one (41%). About a third of these students said they told their friends,

while telling family members, a teacher or the school social worker was rare. Meanwhile, we also find that while young people are most likely to tell a friend about unwanted online sexual experiences, if anyone at all, almost half of those surveyed (46%) said their friends never or hardly ever suggested ways to use the internet safely.



*“Nowadays young people and adults are so different in what they like. Young people like something that is trendy, while the adults care about the current affairs and news. The world of young people and that of the adults are so different.”*

*- Boy, form 2*

*“I won’t share [if I have a problem on the internet] with anyone, because people will keep asking. It’s annoying and there’s no solution at all.”*

*- Boy, form 2*



## PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Parents and caregivers are perhaps the most important guardians of children's online safety. Our study found that parents being generally present whilst the child is online and having open conversations with their children about different aspects of the child's digital life helps children be more protected from dangers on the internet. Parents exercising some kind of authority over their child's internet use may also help parents to be capable guardians of their children online. We found that having household rules about

internet use was associated with lower chances of experiencing cyberbullying. We also found that more frequent use of the internet at home is associated with reduced chances of experiencing the worst forms of online child sexual abuse.

Open communication between parents and children about their online life is a fairly important factor, according to our findings. Good communication practices of parents and caregivers is significantly associated with a lower risk of cyberbullying for children, while parents who often encourage their child to explore the

internet and suggest ways for the child to stay safe on the internet can find that their children face less unwanted online sexual experiences on average as well. We also know that the opposite is true for children who think their parents are less supportive or engaged in their life in general. For these children unwanted online sexual experiences were significantly more common.

Children told us they think parents and caregivers are the ideal people to help young people with online safety, as they are usually close to the child and their advice is trusted.

*“Most of the time, it is the family that influences young people’s lives the most. Family influences how children see things.”*

- Boy, form 2

*“I think it is better to teach this in the family. Children will understand how important of an issue it is if the parents start teaching it from a young age.”*

- Girl, form 2

Parents and caregivers may sometimes struggle to find the balance for what level of engagement they should have in their children’s digital lives. We also know that at least 20% of teenagers are normally reluctant to talk to their parents about what they do on the internet. But our study has determined that having parents engaged in and aware of the digital lives of their children can improve the overall safety of their children online, so parents should not hesitate to start talking with their kids about life in the digital world. For example, parents and caregivers may want to pay attention to which platforms their children devote their time to and what they do, and who they interact with on those platforms. It is important that teenagers feel like they can talk to their parents if they have questions or are uncomfortable about something that happens online.



# GETTING HELP FROM PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

## POSITIVE SIDE

Most of the secondary school students we surveyed said their parents at least sometimes encourage them to explore the internet (86%), at least once suggested safe ways to use the internet (82%), at least sometimes explain why some websites are inappropriate (75%), and sometimes talk to their parents about things that happen online that upset them (72%). Meanwhile 77% of teenagers said they at least sometimes talk to their parents about what they do on the internet.

*“My family taught me to not make friends with strangers, so I just follow their advice and don’t meet these friends offline.”*

- Boy, form 3

*“My mom told me to be very cautious when using the internet, and never send out something personal like a photo to strangers. Because she worried that people online might blackmail me using nude photos. I wouldn’t be able to handle the distress and will end up committing suicide.”*

- Girl, form 2

## NEGATIVE SIDE

Almost 1 in 5 teenagers we surveyed say their parents have never spoken to them about online safety, nearly 1 in 4 never talk to their parents about what they do on the internet, and nearly 1 in 3 said their parents never talk to them about the upsetting things that happen to their child in their digital life. Parents are usually the first people to introduce the internet or digital devices to their children, so they should also be ready to teach them about how to stay safe online.

*“My parents taught me how to use the computer [only functions], but have never taught me the appropriate attitude to have online.”*

- Boy, form 2

*“Before I have my own smartphone, I could not download games myself, because I need parents’ permission. After I have my own smartphone, though I still need my parents’ permission, they tend to forget about this. Then I keep downloading new games.”*

- Boy, form 2



## TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

The support of teachers and schools is also an essential resource for protecting young children and teenagers online. Students who reported that their school or teachers regularly guide them in internet education appear to less commonly face unwanted online sexual experiences, the worst forms of online child sexual abuse, and cyberbullying. There are also indications that having rules for internet use in school may be an important element of this.

Even though teenagers whose teachers suggest safe ways to use the internet are less likely to have unwanted online sexual experiences, at the same time teenagers shared some advice on how

to improve online safety education for schools and social service organizations to consider. The comment heard most often was that students are hoping for more interactive and interesting ways of teaching regarding online safety. For instance, they want to learn from games, videos, or experiential learnings like stage dramas. Young people think if they can have more opportunities to engage in online protection education, the knowledge will be easier for them to remember and can leave a deeper impression. Our study also suggests that any efforts schools can make to help lonely or isolated students make friends at school in the real world rather than making friends with strangers online should also protect those students from many online risks.

## GETTING HELP FROM FROM TEACHERS AND SCHOOL

### POSITIVE SIDE

Most of the teenagers we surveyed said that teachers at their school at least sometimes suggested ways to use the internet safely (84%), and encouraged students to explore and learn things on the internet (85%).

*“Sometimes the school organizes small lectures on online safety. After attending these lectures, those who have feelings of emptiness will know that they shouldn’t mess around the chat app. They could be encouraged to make friends in real life.”*

- Girl, form 2

*“I will talk to social workers. Because students always go talk to them, and I guess among the students who went to talk with them, there will be similar cases like mine. Then, the social workers already had some experience in solving the problem.”*

- Girl, form 2

### NEGATIVE SIDE

Teachers and schools need to provide certain level of support to students’ online safety. Young people told us that they are not very impressed with how it has been taught. Students generally describe existing online safety education programmes as “boring talks and lectures with no interaction”.

*“Students aren’t impressed with the school lectures on online safety. The lectures are so boring. We have to just sit and listen. They should have cartoons, videos, and more interaction between the teacher and student. ”*

- Girl, form 2

*“Those lectures make me feel sleepy.”*

- Boy, form 2

*“The school has not done enough to help student understand online safety. They distributed one or two booklets and organized some lectures. But most of the students won’t participate in these lectures. Therefore, it’s not enough.”*

- Girl, form 2

## GOVERNMENT

A broad public health approach from the government to improving school, student, and family awareness of online risks and effective protection measures is crucial. This, alongside a targeted approach to reach the most vulnerable young children and teenagers, is the best approach to dealing with online safety threats to young children and teenagers in Hong Kong. Young people told us that they sometimes feel helpless as they feel they do not have much control over their experiences on the internet. They think making the internet safer for young



children and teenagers may require support from the government. Teenagers expressed that they hope the government will consider making more public awareness advertisements to reach more people with information about online safety. Some teenagers also said they believe technology companies should work together on these issues, to ensure young children and teenagers can use the internet safely.

## GETTING HELP FROM FROM THE GOVERNMENT

### POSITIVE SIDE

Some young people are aware that the government has done some work in terms of the promotion of online safety, and they find those effective.

*“Government advertisements are more effective [than school online safety lectures]. Every second of advertising costs money, so the information is condensed. Not like those lectures, which always takes one or two hours to finish.”*

- Girl, form 2

### NEGATIVE SIDE

Young people also suggest that more should be done to regulate the digital world. They see that government action is needed to protect them from bad online experiences.

*“The laws [or regulations] are insufficient in this field. It’s difficult to protect [teenagers online] with the laws. And you can hardly restrict the other person’s actions and speech. The only thing that I can do is not to listen or read [those abusive comments].”*

- Boy, form 2



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

- Ensure that law, policies, and government practices create an environment that empowers and protects children online so that young people are able to safely access and realize the benefits of the digital environment.
- Implement digital inclusion policies that ensure all young children and teenagers have equal and effective access to the digital environment and activities that are meaningful for them.
- Create a new role of child online safety commissioner and an independent body on eSafety to coordinate a child-friendly help-seeking and complaint mechanism for cyberbullying, online child sexual exploitation, and abuse and to inform and create regulations, guidelines and public resources for safety in the digital world.
- Adapt school curricula to include practical learning on understanding the benefits and risks of using the internet and provide knowledge on seeking help, recording, and reporting when needed.
- Provide additional training to teachers and social workers on identifying, intervening, and handling online abuse cases.
- Expand the capacity of government entities and NGO partners to refer and provide youth with outreach services via digital channels to identify, proactively approach, and engage at-risk youths and provide them with timely intervention and supportive service.
- Introduce child safeguarding guidelines for digital service providers to ensure their services and content can safeguard children's safety and privacy.



## TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Children of parents who more often encourage their child to explore the internet and suggest ways for the child to stay safe on the internet face fewer unwanted online sexual experiences on average. Find ways to stay engaged with your child's digital life and explore the internet safely together.
- Provide guidance on responsible internet and mobile phone use. Talk about good conduct and manners. Introduce your child to privacy settings and how to report inappropriate content on their favorite platforms.
- Discuss the ground rules for using laptops or smartphones and browsing the internet. Find out how to block access to certain websites and content on devices used by your child when needed.
- Serve as a role model to your children. Teach yourself how to navigate the internet responsibly and safely. Think about what you publish about yourself and your family.
- Give guidance on things outside online life. Exercise, getting enough sleep and friendships offline are all important and help children maintain a healthy balance between online and offline activities.
- Be present. Listen and give support. If your child runs into problems in the digital world, take it seriously and reach out to professionals like school teachers or school social workers for further guidance.



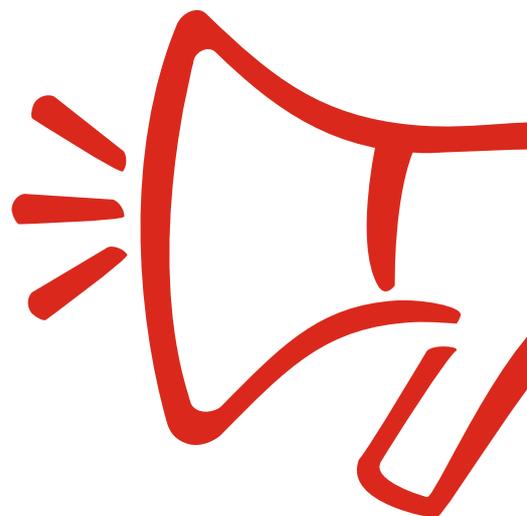
# TIPS FOR YOUTH

- Tell your family about your online life; your parents will be interested and can give you good advice!
- Behave the same way online as in real life. Good manners always work best.
- Remember, what is shared or sent to someone over the internet stays there forever – think twice before you share online!
- Bullying is wrong. If you experience bullying online you can save the bullying messages and tell an adult.
- You can avoid internet or gaming addiction by making sure you take care of your friendships, attend to your homework, eat healthily and get enough sleep. You should talk to a trusted adult if you have difficulty with spending too much time online or in games.
- If you see something disgusting or upsetting on the internet, close the browser or turn off the device and talk to a trusted adult. There are a lot of things online that can make you feel afraid and distressed. You should not hesitate to ask for help!
- Be careful with friendships online. Take care with your privacy settings and reject messages from people you do not want to contact you. No one should pressure you to do or share something you do not want to. Talk to a trusted adult if someone you know online asks you for inappropriate things or pressures you to do things you do not want to do.

# HOW TO REPORT A CASE

If you have encountered online:

- Child Sexual Abuse Materials
- Children Trafficking and Child Sex Tourism
- Cyber Crime
- Cyberbullying
- Or other case related to children's online safety



You can report the case to the eHelp

Association by visiting the web address:

[ehelp.org.hk](http://ehelp.org.hk)

The eHelp Association, established with support from Save the Children Hong Kong in 2017, provides for the daily operation of the online reporting mechanism, refers cases with identified illegal and inappropriate child related content to local legal enforcement department, coordinates with a global network for overseas prosecution and/or removal of illegal child content and refers cases to social workers for counseling and advice.



Visit the website  
of Hong Kong  
eHelp Association

Talk to a social worker

about your situation now:

[aca.org.hk](http://aca.org.hk)

If you or a child in your care has had a harmful experience online or are in need of advice on family matters, contact Save the Children's partner: Against Child Abuse to report your issue and speak with a social worker.

Parents, children, professionals and the public are encouraged to call the Hotline at **2755 1122** or drop-in at their centers to report suspected cases of child abuse or ask for assistance with parenting difficulties. You can also visit their website by scanning the QR code on the right or visiting the above web address.



Visit the website  
of  
Against Child Abuse



# SAMPLING METHODOLOGY

## QUANTITATIVE SAMPLE

This is an exploratory study of Hong Kong students in Primary 4-6 (aged 9-12) and Secondary 7-9 (aged 12-15). In order to obtain a representative sample of this population, the research team compiled a list of all Hong Kong primary and secondary schools, excluding international schools and those dedicated to serving students with special educational needs. Using stratified multi-stage probability proportional to size (PPS) cluster sampling, 10 secondary schools and 10 primary schools were selected as targets for recruitment, with the aim of obtaining roughly 100 students from each

school. PPS multi-stage cluster sampling with equal sample sizes drawn from each cluster has the advantage of producing a sample with the same inclusion probability (representativeness) as a simple random sample of the population.

The study successfully recruited a sample of 1,347 secondary and primary school student participants. Initial response from the 10 randomly selected secondary schools was good, with 6 of the 10 contacted agreeing to participate in the study (a 60% response rate). After an initial piloting stage the response rate from students within the randomly selected schools was also high. However, the collection of the data was

hampered by two macro-systemic problems. First the raging COVID-19 pandemic and the public health measures associated with it kept schools hopping from online to offline instruction contexts which severely hampered the administrative capacity of the teachers to implement the survey. Consequently, one of the 6 randomly selected secondary schools dropped out of the study (reducing the participation rate to 50%). Secondly, many Hong Kong secondary schools are currently undergoing a serious amount of student attrition as families move or send their children overseas for education. At least one of the participating randomly selected schools suffered a sizable loss of its student body, which reduced the number of participants the school was able to contribute to the study. All 5 of the randomly selected schools which eventually participated were aided schools. Aided schools serve 80% of Hong Kong's school students. The ten school target was stratified by aided, direct subsidy, and private. However, the randomly selected private and direct subsidy scheme schools declined the study. Hence, among aided schools 5 out of 8 participated (a 62.5% response rate among aided schools). The random sample can hence be said to be representative of aided schools. A sixth randomly selected aided school was later added to the study along with the convenience sample. Hence, the multi-stage random probability cluster sample portion of the secondary data is

constituted in 6 aided secondary schools with 560 participants. The remaining 537 secondary school participants were obtained via convenience sampling. Bulk email was sent to members of the University of Hong Kong community requesting assistance in recruiting schools, which were enrolled on a voluntary basis to obtain the remaining sample. Hence, the sample of 1,097 secondary students is roughly half random sample, half convenience sample. Our approach to ensuring analysis quality included comparisons of the random and convenience samples in order to detect and compensate for potential bias. The study also contains a convenience sample of 250 primary school students from 5 primary schools.

Recruitment of primary schools commenced later and was hampered by the same systemic impediments that influenced secondary school recruitment; primary school recruitment was further hampered by the sensitive nature of the questionnaire. Most sensitive questions have been removed for the primary school questionnaire. However, in light of these difficulties primary school data collection was changed entirely to the convenience sampling approach discussed above. 250 primary students in 5 primary schools have been added to the sample. Fewer than planned primary students were added as recruitment of primary schools proved even more difficult than recruitment of secondary schools.

Survey participants were recruited by the study team first by contacting schools that had been randomly selected and working to build a relationship that fosters collaboration. To incentivize school participation, safe online behavior training for students and school staff were offered by Save the Children to participating schools, which took place only after the sample had been collected in order for the training to not influence survey results. Once the school had agreed to participate in the study, students in (randomly) selected classes were asked to provide informed assent to participate in the study, and to obtain informed consent from a parent or guardian at home. The lead researcher at The University of Hong Kong developed and implemented a one day training for the collection of sensitive data. A refusal conversion protocol was implemented for parents who failed to respond to the request for informed consent (as well as schools that do not at first respond to the request to participate). The research team worked to keep the survey response rate at or above the 80% threshold. The study team offered small coupons (equal to 20 HKD in value) to students who consented to participate and offered participation in a lucky draw to receive Apple AirPods. The intent was to compensate for participation while avoiding putting any pressure on the children to complete the survey. An additional benefit was offered to parents of participants. Based on

survey findings, tailored recommendations are to be made (via email) to parents of participants about how they might better protect their children online. Parent contact information was kept in a separate file from student data, which is stripped of identifying personal information. The study team conducted the sampling, school recruitment, interview process, data analysis, and report writing.

About sample size and power analysis, the target sample size of 1,600 allows for a +/- 2.5% margin of error around point estimates of population prevalence ( $(n = z/w)^2 = (1.96/0.05)^2 = 1,537$ ). However, limiting the margin of error to the random portion of the sample gives a margin of error of roughly +/- 4.5%. Currently 42% of the secondary school sample has experienced any (at least 1 or more) unwanted online sexual experience, which gives group sizes of 452 victimized and 635 non-victimized participants. This sample currently has 75% power to detect an effect size of  $\delta = 0.2$ . Even if the sample is limited to the randomly sampled portion, these group sizes are 208 and 344 respectively, with 81% power to detect an effect size of  $\delta = 0.25$ . Hence, we believe the sample size is adequate for most inferential statistics of consequence, and is particularly generalizable to students of aided secondary schools (80% of students) in Hong Kong.



## QUALITATIVE SAMPLE

The qualitative study conducted 5 focus group interviews using an adapted version of the Global Kids Online study methods. The study aimed to collect 1 focus group out of every other secondary school sampled. Participants and their parents/guardians were asked to provide informed consent to participate in the study. Participants were lower secondary students aged 12-15 in grades 7-9. The lead researcher developed and implemented a one day training for the collection of sensitive data. All members of the study team

who had contact with participants were required to complete this training.

After informed consent was obtained, focus group interviewers began by introducing the study and its purposes, and asking the students for help in achieving those goals by sharing their experiences. The team reviewed the qualitative materials to ensure the language is age appropriate and culturally appropriate. The interviewer provided time for the teenagers to warm up and held small sessions with groups of 2-3 students to assist with focus. Part of the goal was to empower the teenagers to realize that they have valuable

expertise on the topic. The interviewer and the team were prepared to refer teenagers to support services as necessary, however this has not been necessary in the course of the study. The warm-up phase asked teenagers to introduce themselves, talk about what they like most about the internet, when they last used it, and interesting experiences they have had online. The Global Kids Online study framework provides a total of 7 themes: opportunities, access, skills and practices, risks, well-being and resilience, mediation, and digital ecology. However, in order to maintain the quality of the data the focus groups concentrated specifically on skills and practices, risks, well-being and resilience, and mediation. Focus group session wrap-up included a summary of the points discussed, thanking the participants, asking whether they have important points to add, and asking how they felt during the interview. Any questions the students had were also answered at that time.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATION AND PROCEDURES**

Ethical approval has been obtained from the University of Hong Kong's Institutional Review Board. Written informed consent was obtained from parents and informed assent was obtained from all participants. Great care has been taken

to make sure parents and children are informed of study risks and benefits, and that participants and parents know that participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn without negative consequences at any time. The approach conforms to Save the Children's policy and Global Kids Online's guide for ethical research with children, which were required reading for interviewer training. The key issues stressed in the guide are privacy, managing distress, informed consent, security and confidentiality, inclusiveness, payment and compensation, and use of interpreters when necessary. The governing principles are respect, first do no harm, and justice. In accordance with guidelines, study gifts were provided after the interview was complete, and some resources (programming) are being provided to schools. None of the participants have shown significant distress to date. The online questionnaire provided pop-up boxes with automatic referrals when participants indicated victimization had occurred. If participants did show distress or reveal maltreatment they were provided with a referral to a sexual abuse crisis response service provider or other relevant child protection authority or helpline. The study team includes a highly experienced clinical psychologist (Dr Wong, Paul Wai Ching) to manage this process. Great care was taken to protect confidentiality and privacy of participants in all parts of the data collection process.



# DEFINITION OF TERMS

## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse is a broad category that, at its core, defines the harm caused to children by forcing or coercing them to engage in sexual activity, whether they are aware of what is happening or not. While most forms of child sexual abuse are contact abuse, it must be acknowledged that child sexual abuse can also be committed without physical contact (so-called “non-contact abuse”). Common examples of “non-contact sexual abuse” are sexual harassment of children, including verbal harassment such as unwanted sexual comments. When the child has not reached the age of sexual consent, the mere fact of the sexual activity taking place is sufficient to constitute abuse.

## ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Child Sexual Exploitation has been defined as “(a) the inducement, coercion or encouragement of a child to engage in any sexual activity; (b) the use of children in prostitution or other sexual practices; (c) the use of children in pornographic activities, performances and materials”. It is a form of child sexual abuse that involves “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another”. Children can be the perpetrators, as well as the victims, of child sexual exploitation. When other children are the

perpetrators it is described as “peer-on-peer” sexual exploitation. When these acts or events take place on the internet, it is known as Online Child Sexual Exploitation. For the purposes of our study, we have considered children did not answer negatively or did not provide a blank response to the question “I have done something sexual on the internet when I did not want to” as having experienced online child sexual exploitation.

## CYBERFLASHING

Cyberflashing is sending an unwanted nude genitalia image to someone else, for example via a messaging app or AirDrop. It can leave victims feeling ashamed, violated and intimidated, particularly if it is the first time they have seen a naked image. For the purposes of our study we have considered any child who responded positively to the following question as having been a victim of cyberflashing: “I have seen or received a sexual message, image or video about someone else that I did not want” or “I opened a message or a link in a message that showed pictures of naked people or of people having sex that I did not want”.

## ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment, refers to any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. “Unwanted sexual comments” can be an example of this. Pressuring someone to share their nude photos is also a form of sexual harassment. The notion of sexual harassment is used more often with regard to adults than it is for children, however sexual harassment of children can happen at school or on the internet and such acts are considered a form of child sexual abuse. For the purposes of our study we have considered children who responded positively to any of the following questions as having experienced online sexual harassment: “I have been asked for sexual information about myself (like what my body looks like without clothes on or sexual things I have done) when I did not want to answer such questions”, “I have been asked to talk about sexual acts with someone on the internet when I did not want to”, “I have been asked by someone on the internet to do something sexual when I did not want to”, and “I have been asked on the internet for a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to.”

## NEGLECT

The Hong Kong Social Welfare Department defines Neglect as “...a severe or repeated pattern of lack of attention to a child’s basic needs that endangers or impairs the child’s health or development.” For the purposes of our study, we consider any child who answered positively to the following question as having experienced neglect: “When someone is neglected, it means that the grown-ups in their life didn’t take care of them the way they should. They might not get them enough food, take them to the doctor when they are sick, or make sure they have a safe place to stay. In the last year did you get neglected?”

## CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place on the internet, or over digital devices like cell phones and tablets. It can happen on social media, in instant messaging or online gaming platforms. It typically involves sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature. For the purposes of our study children who identified as having been treated in a hurtful or nasty way online or through a mobile phone are considered to have experienced cyberbullying.



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The principal investigator of the Study is Dr. Clifton R. Emery, Associate Professor of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong.

The co-investigator is Dr Wong, Paul Wai Ching, a clinical psychologist and an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong.

The original commissioned study is titled “An Exploratory Study on Understanding Online Risks and Children’s Online Behaviour in Hong Kong”. A copy of the original study is available [here](#) on our website.

Save the Children Hong Kong strives to elevate the voices of children in all its work and is grateful to the many young children and teenagers who participated in the focus group discussions and survey upon which this research is based.



**Save the Children**  
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