



Building a Europe  
for and with children  
Construire une Europe  
pour et avec les enfants



CDENF(2024)05  
Strasbourg, 6 May 2024

## **Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF)**

**Concept note for a thematic exchange**

***Safeguarding children from the risks of accessing online pornographic content***

*Document prepared by the Secretariat*

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### **General Context**

Protecting children from the risks associated with accessing pornographic content online has become a major concern with the rise of digital technology and children's unhindered access to such materials, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The viewing of pornography can expose children to violent and age-inappropriate content which has a proven impact on the increase of verbal aggression and sexual violence<sup>1</sup> and trigger harmful sexual behaviors among children and teenagers.<sup>2</sup>

For this thematic exchange, "pornography" is defined as referring to any material depicting a person engaged in sexually explicit conduct, whether real or simulated, which typically includes portrayals of nudity and/or various sexual acts. This definition does not include child sexual abuse material, which is always illegal.<sup>3</sup> It can be professionally or self-produced. With the omnipresence of the Internet and connected devices, children are increasingly exposed to such content on platforms or social networks. According to research,<sup>4</sup> 2.6 billion children around the world today<sup>5</sup> are viewing this content. It can have a profound impact on their development and mental health.

Relevant Council of Europe reports prepared in this context (see Appendix I) underline the importance of **comprehensive sexuality education** to counter the adverse effects of viewing or being exposed to pornography on children and correct the distorted view of sexuality and gender stereotypes conveyed by pornographic content. The Council of Europe is currently working on a feasibility study on comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality education for children, which will possibly pave the way for the future adoption of non-legally binding standards in the form of a recommendation.<sup>6</sup> This could be a step towards protecting children more effectively from online content that could be harmful to them.<sup>7</sup>

Alongside this work, the issue of **verifying age online and the role of regulators**, including the state, technology companies and social media platforms are essential aspects to be considered, taking due account of other important elements such as data protection standards.

### **Aim of the thematic exchange**

Against this background, during its upcoming 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary meeting (28-30 May 2024), the **Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDEF)** will dedicate a thematic exchange to explore avenues for safeguarding children from the risks of accessing online pornographic content. While it is important to stress that children can be victims of sexual abuse online, the focus of this thematic exchange will be on children accessing content which is legal for adults to view but which is harmful for children.

This exchange aims at informing the CDEF to what extent and how is it possible to protect children and teenagers from the dangers of accessing pornographic material online, taking into account that the Internet has no borders. It will also offer an opportunity to exchange information on relevant national activities and to have a common reflection for future possible CDEF actions, such as a guidance note for member states.

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<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary Assembly, [The protection of children against online violence](#) §25, 27 March 2024

<sup>2</sup> [Research into the impact of pornography on children | Children's Commissioner for England](#), 25 November 2022

<sup>3</sup> [Article 20 of the Lanzarote Convention](#) requires States to criminalise "child pornography" the Lanzarote Committee has recommended that the term "child sexual abuse material" be used in line with the [Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines](#).

<sup>4</sup> WeProtect Global Alliance, *Estimates of childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors*, 2021

<sup>5</sup> UN World Population Prospects, global population ages 0-19, 2020

<sup>6</sup> Smaniotto B, *Réflexions autour de l'impact de la pornographie... sur la sexualité adolescente*, Revue de l'enfance et de l'adolescence, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Campbell M, Daly A, O'Sullivan C, *Feasibility study on comprehensive, age-appropriate sex education for children*, ENF-VAE, Council of Europe, 2024

### **Practical information**

**Title:** Thematic exchange on safeguarding children from the risks of accessing online pornographic content

**Date:** Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> May 9h00 – 12h30

**Place:** Strasbourg (Council of Europe Agora room G03) and Online

**Registration:** upon invitation, through an online link

### **Draft agenda**

**Moderator and introduction:**

**Regina Jensdottir**, Head of the Children's Rights Division, Council of Europe

**Speakers:**

- **Maree Crabbe**, Director, [It's time we talked](#)  
**Impact and risks of pornography on children**
- **Julia Cooke**, International Policy Manager, [UK Ofcom](#)  
**Regulating access through age assurances**
- **Andrea Tognoni**, Head of EU Affairs, [5rightsfoundation](#)  
**Benefits, pitfalls and next steps for regulation**

**Discussion:** The floor will then be open to Delegations wishing to share experiences, challenges, comments, or ask questions.

### **Possible questions for the exchange**

- To what extent children's early viewing of pornographic content may impact the normalisation of violent behavior in intimate relationships?
- How can comprehensive sexuality education contribute to raising children's awareness about pornography's harmful aspects?
- To what extent could stricter regulation of the pornography industry be implemented to protect children from exposure to harmful online content? What would such a regulation consist of?
- Can you share good or promising practices to address the risks of pornography for children in your country?

### **Appendix - Relevant Council of Europe work**

The issues raised by children's viewing of pornographic content online are linked to several strategic objectives of the [Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#).<sup>8</sup> Access to pornography can expose children to violent and age-inappropriate content. It has a proven impact on children and teenagers' behavior and on the increase of verbal aggression and sexual violence.<sup>9</sup> The exposure of children to pornography is thereby thwarting objective 1 of the Strategy, which is to ensure a violence-free life for all children. To achieve objective 3 of the Strategy, aimed at ensuring the safe use of technologies, it is essential to put in place measures to ensure a safe online environment and protect children from early and unsupervised exposure to this type of content.

Furthermore, according to Article 22 of the [Lanzarote Convention](#), each state party to the Convention shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to criminalise the intentional act of causing a child, who has not reached the age specified in accordance with Article 18, paragraph 2, and for specific purpose, to witness sexual abuse or sexual activities, online ones included.<sup>10</sup>

The Council of Europe has produced a non-binding legal instrument with the aim of setting minimum standards in terms of child protection to safeguard children's rights in the digital sphere. This is [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)7 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on guidelines for respecting, protecting and fulfilling children's rights in the digital environment](#).<sup>11</sup>

Other standards refer to pornography and the risks for children, namely the Committee of Ministers [Recommendation on Preventing and Combating Sexism](#)<sup>12</sup> and the [Guidelines on the place of men and boys in gender equality policies and in policies to combat violence against women](#).<sup>13</sup> They underline the need to develop critical thinking to counter sexism, including in pornography and to introduce measures and tools enhancing the skills of parents to deal with cybersexism and internet pornography.

The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) also identified the risks of pornography on children in a report adopted in 2021 on [Gender aspects and human rights implications of pornography](#).<sup>14</sup> In its resolution, PACE is calling for comprehensive sexuality education in schools to become "*the main source of information on sexuality for young people*", thus helping prevent the spread of unreliable and potentially harmful information via pornography. A report adopted on 19 April 2024 on [the protection of children against online violence](#)<sup>15</sup> further highlights that "*Pornography must be understood as a public health issue, for which States are responsible for taking appropriate measures, including education and awareness-raising measures. The minimum standard to protect children should be age verification obligations on websites*". Finally, the European Audiovisual Observatory issued a [new mapping report](#) on the protection of minors on video sharing platforms: age verification and parental control,<sup>16</sup> which highlights these challenges through a comparative analysis of some thirty European countries.

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<sup>8</sup> [Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> Draft PACE report: The protection of children against online violence (working document), §25, 7 March 2024

<sup>10</sup> See also : [Opinion](#) on Article 23 of the Lanzarote Convention – Solicitation of children for sexual purposes through information and communication technologies, [Interpretative Opinion](#) on the applicability of the Lanzarote Convention to sexual offences against children facilitated through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), [Opinion](#) on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children, adopted on 6 June 2019; [Implementation Report](#) on the the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): Addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos, 2nd monitoring round, adopted on 30 March 2022.

<sup>11</sup> CMRec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on guidelines for respecting, protecting and fulfilling children's rights in the digital environment, 4 July 2028

<sup>12</sup> Committee of Ministers, Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism, 27 March 2019

<sup>13</sup> Committee of Ministers, Guidelines CM(2023)51-add2-final, 8 June 2023

<sup>14</sup> Parliamentary Assembly, *Gender aspects and human rights implications of pornography*, 26 November 2021

<sup>15</sup> Parliamentary Assembly, *The protection of children against online violence*, 27 March 2024

<sup>16</sup> European Audiovisual Observatory, *The protection of minors on VSP's: age verification and parental control*, December 2023