Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking

Findings from 2020 quantitative research among 9–17 year olds

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The quantitative research was designed to track trends in minors' online behaviors from our national benchmark research[1] in 2019, and explore additional topics such as barriers to disclosure of online harms.

In total, 2,002 minors from across the United States participated in a 20-minute online survey from October 25 to November 11, 2020. Specifically, sample makeup included:

- N=742: 9-12 year olds
- N=1,260: 13-17 year olds

However, only the demographic questions and some of the broader questions, such as platform usage, were asked of the entire sample. For the majority of the survey, minors were split evenly and randomly into two groups and shown a set of questions based on the group they were assigned to. This report will focus on the Hurdles to Disclosure questions, which were asked of 1,000 minors. Specifically, this group included:

- N=391: 9-12 year olds
- N=609: 13-17 year olds

To ensure a representative nationwide sample, data was weighted to age, gender, race, and geography. These weights were also held within each of the two groups to ensure they independently represented the nation's demographics.

A Note on Privacy and Safety

Ensuring the privacy and safety of those who chose to participate in this research was paramount. In each phase of research, in order for minors to participate, their caregiver had to sign a release form detailing the nature of the study. In addition, help resources were provided to participants in the event they wanted to learn more about the topics discussed or needed professional support to talk about these issues.

[1] Thorn. (2019). *Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Attitudes and Experiences.* Available at https://www.thorn.org/self-generated-child-sexual-abuse-material-attitudes-and-experiences/

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Overview

Research is increasingly suggesting that sharing "nudes" is becoming a common behavior among young people. Thorn's 2019 SG-CSAM Report[2] found that approximately 40% of teens believed it was "normal for people my age to share nudes with each other" and a 2020 comparison study[3] suggests this behavior is on the rise.

These experiences - while for some a normative form of sexual exploration - are not without significant risk. Unfortunately, the 2019 report also found young people lack trust in the protective systems around them, both in-person and online, for support as they navigate this topic. Concerns of being blamed, shamed, or ignored are isolating victims and putting them at greater or prolonged risk.

For many, the first line of defense in responding to an online threat is platform-based safety tools such as blocking and reporting. However, participants in the 2019 research - particularly those who reported having shared their own nudes - expressed a general distrust of online platforms' security features.

Ensuring young people have the support they need when confronting risky situations online is a priority for Thorn. We're continuing to invest in research to understand young people's instincts around disclosures and reporting, the barriers they face, and their resulting actions. At base, we are asking the question: what makes or breaks a minor's decision to turn to a specific support system?

In 2020, Thorn launched another wave of youth-centered research, surveying 1,000 minors, ages 9-17, about their attitudes and experiences around blocking and reporting instances of potentially harmful online sexual interactions. Four key insights emerged:

1 **Minors are having online sexual interactions with both peers and individuals they believe to be adults at concerningly similar rates.**

2 **Minors are more than twice as likely to use online safety tools to combat potentially harmful online sexual interactions than they are to use offline support systems, such as caregivers or peers.**

3 **Blocking is viewed by minors as a more accessible and less punitive tool to respond to online threats. As a result, blocking is much more common than reporting among minors.**

4 **Neither blocking nor reporting sufficiently protect minors from continued harassment by other platform users.**

[2] Thorn. (2019). *Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Attitudes and Experiences*. Available at https://www.thorn.org/self-generated-child-sexual-abuse-material-attitudes-and-experiences/

[3] Thorn. (2020). *SG-CSAM Attitudes and Experiences: Year-to-Year Findings*. Unpublished data.

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Key Findings

HIGHLIGHTS

Girls (13-17) are nearly

3x

more likely to be asked for a nude online than teen boys

1 IN 6

Girls (9-12) reported an online sexual interaction with someone they thought was an adult

Frequency of Online Sexual Interactions

Young people use many of the same widely popular platforms as adults, often in spite of age limitations put in place by the platform. They are drawn to opportunities to meet new people, generate content and build a following, and explore without fear of judgement. While the most common experiences reported involved bullying or generally being made to feel uncomfortable (38%), 1 in 3 participants (33%) reported having had an online sexual interaction – for example, sexting or being asked for or sent nude imagery.

Online sexual interactions were more prevalent with both LGBTQ+ minors and teen girls. For example, more than 1 in 4 (28%) LGBTQ+ minors have been sent a nude photo or video, compared to 1 in 5 (20%) non-LGBTQ+ minors. Teen girls were nearly three times more likely to be solicited for a nude (28%) than teen boys (11%).

Minors are having online sexual interactions with people they believe to be adults and minors at similar rates.

25%
18 years or older

23%
Under 18 years old
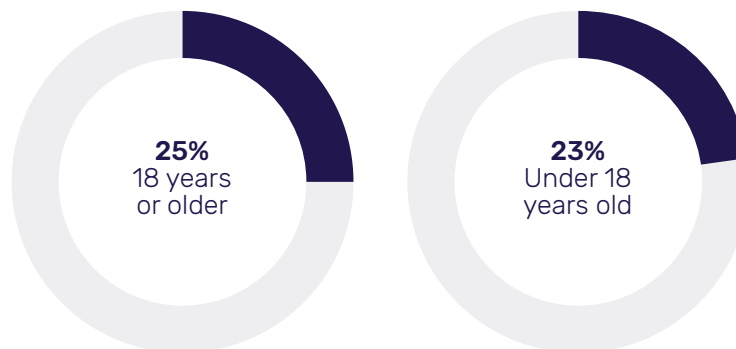
Concerningly, minors are having online sexual interactions with individuals they believe to be adults and other minors at similar rates. One-quarter of participants (25%) reported having had an online sexual interaction with someone they thought was 18 or older compared to the 23% of participants that have had a similar experience with someone they believed to be under 18 years old.

Not surprisingly, the likelihood of these experiences increases with age, particularly among girls: 34% of teen girls reported having had an online sexual interaction with someone they believed to be over 18 compared to approximately 1 in 6 (16%) 9-12 year old girls.

LGBTQ+ youth were also more likely to have online sexual interactions with someone they believed to be an adult. Nearly 1 in 3 LGBTQ+ minors (32%) reported an online sexual interaction with someone they believed to be over 18, ten percentage points higher than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (22%).

Online sexual interactions are occurring on all major platforms. On average, more than 1 in 10 (13%) participants who stated they have used a platform reported having an online sexual interaction there. The prevalence of these experiences varied across platforms and couldn't be explained by use alone. Several platforms had rates of sexual interactions, both generally and specifically with users believed to be over 18, which were disproportionate to their overall popularity among participants.

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How Minors Respond

Many minors who have potentially harmful online experiences are not seeking help or telling anyone what has happened to them. Among minors who had an online sexual interaction, 26% didn't report it to anyone, with nearly half (49%*[4]) of those saying they didn't report because it wasn't a big deal. Additionally, one in four (23%*) worried it would not be anonymous and one in six (17%*) said they felt embarrassed.

Minors who've had potentially harmful online experiences and do decide to take action are more open to using online safety tools than turning to offline support systems such as a caregiver or friend. For those who have experienced an online sexual interaction, the gap between using online safety tools versus turning to someone offline is stark: 83% responded with an online safety tool (block/report/mute) while only 37% reported it offline (parent/caregiver/trusted adult/peer).

heyyy...

CAN YOU SEND ME...

☑ BLOCK

☑ REPORT

☑ MUTE
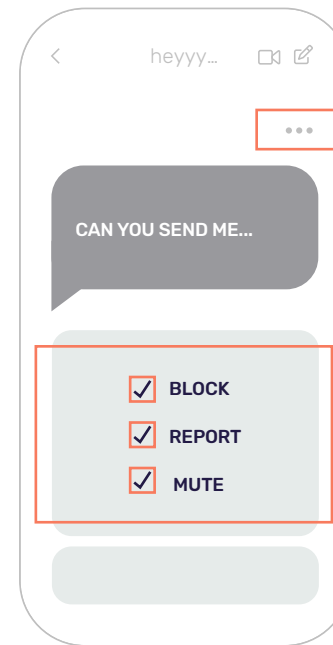
83%
Responded with an online safety tool

37% Reported it offline to a parent, caregiver, trusted adult, or peer

"I trust my parents but sometimes I don't trust them in that way because like you said, they don't have as much experience on social media and stuff. They know about it but they don't really have personal experience."

— Girl, 17 years old, White, West[5]

[4] Figures with an * indicate a base size <100.
[5] Thorn. (2020). Focus Groups with Youth and Caregivers. March, 2020, Denver. Unpublished data.

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HIGHLIGHT

6%

Of 9-17 year olds turned to a caregiver/trusted adult after being sent a nude by someone they thought was an adult

Minors appear to do a good job of anticipating their use of online tools in potentially harmful scenarios, but significantly overestimate the likelihood they will disclose these experiences to trusted people in their lives, underscoring the importance of online reporting tools in keeping kids safe. For example, while 31% of minors stated they would turn to a caregiver or other trusted adult if they were sent a nude online by someone they believed to be an adult, only 6% actually did when confronted with this experience. By comparison, 67% of minors said they'd turn to an online safety tool if presented with this situation, and in fact 71% did.

Blocking is the online safety tool of choice over reporting or muting, particularly for minors who've had a sexual interaction online. While 47% of young people who had experienced an online sexual interaction reported it to the platform, 65% used blocking tools in response to the experience.

The frequency of blocking is notably higher among teen girls: nearly three-quarters (72%) of 13-17 year old girls have blocked someone in response to an online sexual interaction, compared to just 54%* of their teen male counterparts.

Optimizing Reporting

Minors are currently more likely to use blocking tools than reporting. While this offers some protection from an aggressor, it does not give platforms the level of detail that may be required to not just block contact between two accounts, but to identify and remove bad actors from their platforms. In cases of child endangerment and exploitation, one child reporting may make the difference for dozens of other children being targeted by the same user.

Minors view blocking and reporting differently. Blocking is about self-protection, creating a wall between themselves and an aggressor, while reporting is about punishment. When asked to describe the differences between blocking and reporting in their own words, over half of minors interviewed (55%) said reporting was more punitive than blocking, but blocking did more to prevent further harassment (28%) or stop the aggressor from continuing to see their content (23%). Given this view of blocking versus reporting, combined with their tendency to downplay harmful experiences, it is not surprising that young people turn more often to blocking over reporting.

Concerns about being shamed or blamed play a significant role as young people decide if, when, and how to seek help. Anonymity, as a natural defense against negative consequences such as shame and blame, plays a key role in reporting to platforms.

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HIGHLIGHT

23%

Of 9-17 year olds don't feel like reporting categories fit if they're solicited for nudes by an adult

22%

Of 9-17 year olds don't feel like reporting categories fit if their nudes are leaked

More than two-thirds (68%) of participants said they'd be more likely to report if the process was anonymous. While young people want anonymity, they also want human connection. While it's neither scalable nor safe for content moderators to work directly with minors attempting to report harmful online experiences, this does present an opportunity for platforms to surface alternative resources, such as crisis services, helplines, or online help resources.

Overall, minors say they know how to use platform reporting tools. However, when given a series of commonly available options from reporting menus, many indicated that none of the options fit the situation. Nearly one-quarter of minors said they "don't feel like any of these choices fit the situation" if they were trying to report being solicited for nude images by someone they believed to be an adult (23%) or if they were trying to report that their nudes had been leaked (22%).

The rate at which reports on a platform are considered 'resolved' by young people is seen as good, however, for many, the resolution drags out and at times never comes. Nearly one in five minors (19%) who have reported something to a platform said it took over a week for their report to be handled, and nearly a quarter (22%) said their report was never resolved. This is a critical window during which the child remains vulnerable to continued victimization.

A majority of minors who have either reported or blocked someone say they have been recontacted by that person, suggesting these tools are failing to adequately protect youth from continued harassment. Over half of participants who had blocked (55%) or reported (55%) someone, said they were recontacted online. Nearly half (45% who blocked, 47% who reported) were recontacted on the same platform versus approximately 4 in 10 (43% who blocked, 40% who reported) were recontacted on a different platform.

"Reporting someone is when you tell on them so they get in trouble and blocking someone is when you make it so they can't say anything to you and you can't see each other online anywhere."
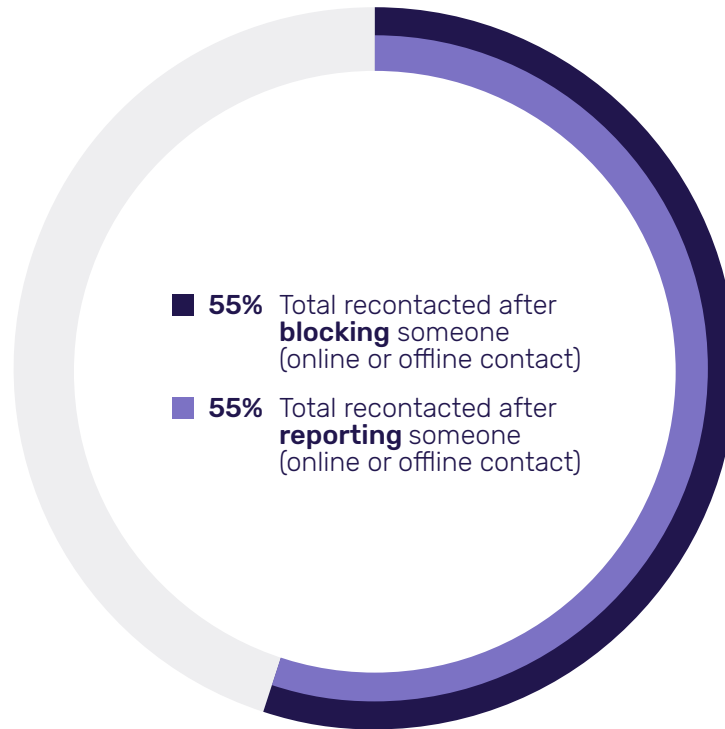
— Cis Boy, 9 years old, White, Midwest

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Where minors are being recontacted *(Among minors who have blocked/reported someone)*

HIGHLIGHT

# 78%

Of boys (9-12) were recontacted by someone they reported

55% Total recontacted after **blocking** someone (online or offline contact)

55% Total recontacted after **reporting** someone (online or offline contact)

After **blocking**

45%
On the same platform under a new identity

43%
On a different platform

After **reporting**

47%
On the same platform under a new identity

40%
On a different platform

Boys, and particularly younger boys (ages 9-12), were the most likely to be recontacted after either blocking or reporting someone they only knew online. Overall, 70% of 9-12 year old boys who have blocked someone they only knew online were recontacted compared to just under half of 9-12 year old girls (47%*). Among teens, 55% of 13-17 year old boys who have blocked
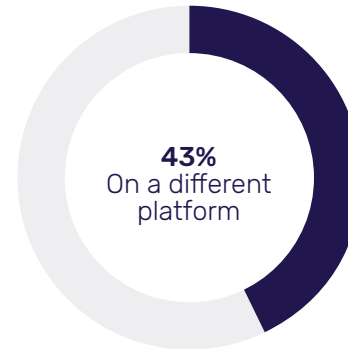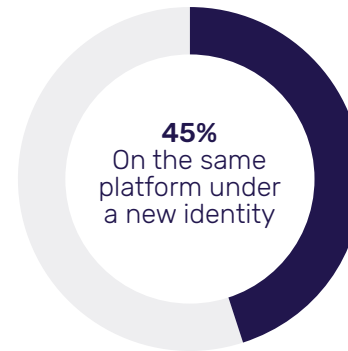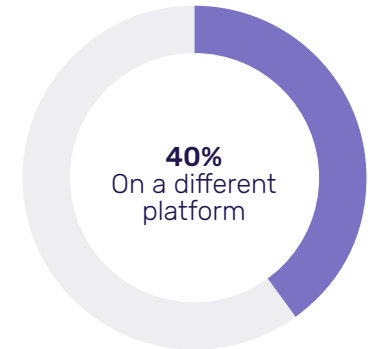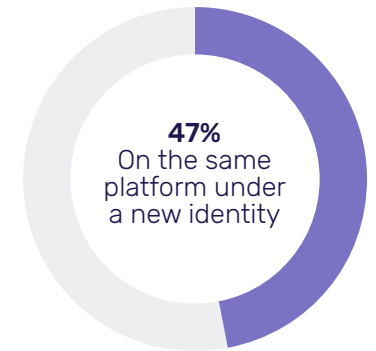
someone they only knew online have been recontacted compared to 45% of 13-17 year old girls. Among younger minors (ages 9-12), the same demographic story holds true after reporting someone they only knew online: 78% of 9-12 year old boys were recontacted compared to just under half of 9-12 year old girls (42%*).

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Closing Remarks

Young people get immense value from exploring, connecting, and experimenting online, but this can also introduce new types of risk–taking. We must understand what these moments look like and the trade–offs young people are weighing to identify the greatest opportunities to empower and support them.

Maintaining safe online spaces for young people requires a combination of tactics - building safe ecosystems, safeguarding exploration, detecting harmful content and bad actors at scale, and responding swiftly and fully to public reports of potential threats. Offline support systems play a critical role in keeping kids safe and secure; however, many kids are not turning to them in times of crisis. Instead, they leverage the tools platforms build in - blocking and reporting - and have faith these steps will be sufficient to defend against unwanted and harmful encounters. To this end, platforms are the first line of protection for their users, particularly young people.

And while many companies are leaning into this responsibility, platforms' systems and policies intended to protect young users are not keeping up with the risks they face online. It's important to learn from the experiences of young people and encourage their engagement with reporting tools. Quality engagement can deliver valuable and actionable reports for platforms, improving outcomes for both individuals and digital communities alike. With continued investment into relevant and accessible safety solutions, platforms can deliver vibrant digital ecosystems where kids can explore safely.

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Understanding the complex intersection of technology and child sexual abuse empowers us to safeguard kids from the ever-evolving threats they face online. Without direct insights from kids who are encountering these issues every day, we risk falling behind in developing valuable resources for them to navigate the digital age safely.

THANK YOU

We are grateful to the kids who took time to participate in our survey. Without their gracious participation, we would not be able to share these key insights about the hurdles to disclosure for online harms.

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