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# Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Attitudes and Experiences

Findings from 2019 qualitative and quantitative research among  
9-17 year olds and caregivers

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Research conducted by Thorn in partnership with Benenson Strategy Group

THORN <sup>1</sup>



# Research Methodology

## PHASE 1: QUALITATIVE

Benenson Strategy Group conducted 19 online diaries from July 29 to August 11, 2019. Participants answered 3 question sets with 8-9 multi-layer questions per set.

Benenson Strategy Group also conducted 3 60-minute focus groups in Boston, MA on August 8, 2019. Groups were conducted among children ages 9-12 years old:

- 2 groups of 3 (9-12 year old girls)
- 1 group of 4 (9-12 year old boys)

## PHASE 2: QUANTITATIVE

Benenson Strategy Group conducted a 20-minute online survey nationwide among children and caregivers from October 14 to October 25, 2019.

The survey was conducted among:

- N=394 (9-12 year olds)
- N=602 (13-17 year olds)
- N=402 (18+ caregivers)

To ensure a representative sample nationwide, we weighted age, gender, race and geography.

# Overview

Self-generated child sexual abuse material (SG-CSAM) is a rapidly growing area of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) in circulation online and being consumed by communities of abusers. Importantly, SG-CSAM – explicit imagery of a child that appears to have been taken by the child in the image – presents unique investigative challenges for law enforcement and a distinct threat to its victims.

The pathways leading to the production of this imagery are varied, ranging from consensual sexting among peers to coercive grooming by a stranger online, and it may be impossible for investigators to know the circumstances under which SG-CSAM was produced from looking at the picture alone.

Regardless of the pathway, the resulting images are still CSAM. Their distribution threatens the wellbeing of the child in the image, and they can be used by offenders to groom future victims.

However, the distinction of why the images were produced is a critical one. The experiences leading kids to produce SG-CSAM because they have been groomed by an online offender are fundamentally different than those leading them to “share nudes” with a partner and require very different tactics to safeguard the victims.

In 2019, Thorn set out to examine attitudes and experiences around SG-CSAM. We heard from more than 1,000 kids, aged 9–17, and 400 caregivers. Early conversations indicated that grooming and sexting are viewed very differently by kids. While grooming appears to be an acknowledged threat against which kids work to protect themselves and their peers, sexting is decidedly more grey and becoming an increasingly popular behavior.

The research conducted thus far has focused largely on the threat of sexting. Three important themes have emerged:

- 1 Producing, sharing, and re-sharing is increasingly common, with many kids viewing “sharing nudes” or “sexting” as normal among peers.**
- 2 Experiences vary depending on the presence of consent and coercion, and the harm of initially consensual experiences can escalate rapidly when images are non-consensually re-shared beyond the intended recipient.**
- 3 Reactions to kids seeking help with this issue often range from inaction to blame; this is compounding the harm of negative online experiences and further isolating kids in trouble.**

*“We all do it.  
It is ok.”*

– BOY, 15–17, WHITE

# Key Findings

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

39%

of teens (13-17) say sharing nudes is normal among their peers

45%

of caregivers say sharing nudes of themselves would be okay to do in a relationship

Producing and sharing SG-CSAM is becoming increasingly common according to survey participants, with 1 in 5 teenage girls and 1 in 10 teenage boys reporting they had shared nudes. Further, when exploring attitudes about this behavior, nearly 40% of teens agreed “it’s normal for people my age to share nudes with each other.”

The survey also shows this is not an experience isolated to kids. Nearly half of caregivers (45%) said it was OK for adults to share a nude image or video if you were in a relationship with the person, suggesting this behavior may be developing as a normalized form of flirting in a digital age.

Kids who had shared nudes did not report it to be a fundamentally negative experience; rather, the most common feelings reported were positive ones. Indeed, kids who shared their nudes say doing so made them feel “excited” and “confident,” and numerous respondents reported it as a positive experience because of the trust it represented in their relationship with the recipient.

Figure 1 | How did you feel after you shared this nude photo or video?

positive feelings (excited, confident, good)	47%
negative feelings (bad, shame, guilt, uncomfortable)	36%
nothing/felt the same	15%

(Among kids who shared with someone they had met before in real life)

Experiences were not exclusively positive, however, and 36% of participants reported negative feelings such as “guilt” and “embarrassment”. While kids are aware of the potential for harm in sharing SG-CSAM, as it becomes increasingly normalized it appears many are willing to take the risk for the potential of positive experiences.

“I felt good and exhilarated. It was kinda an adrenaline rush.”

— GIRL, 15-17, LATINA

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

63%

of kids who shared their own SG-CSAM did not think anything would happen if they reported inappropriate images to a platform

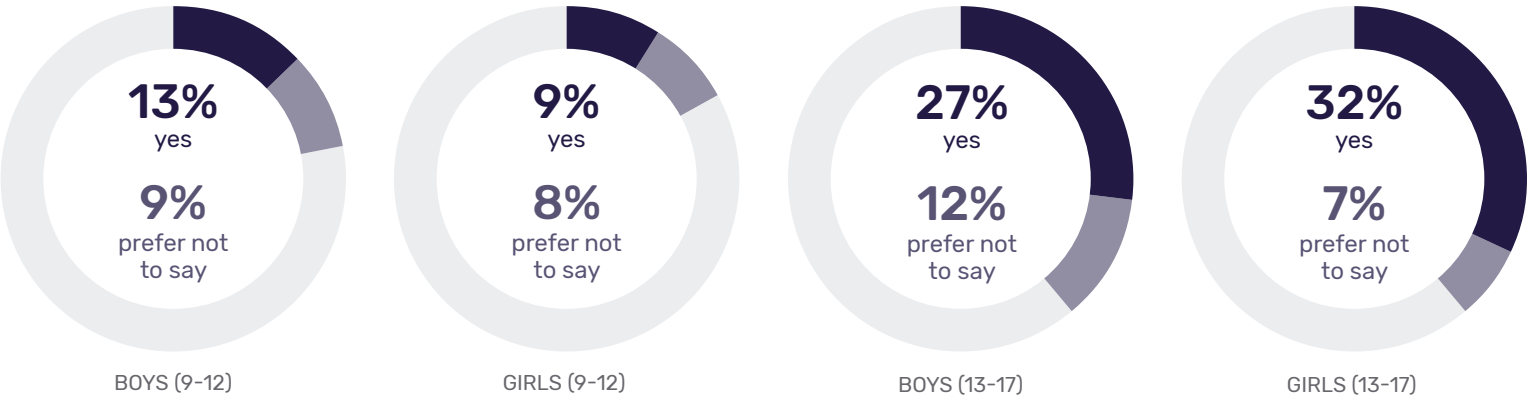
Sharing one’s own nudes can feel empowering, however, having one’s nudes “leak” – or re-shared without consent – is a source of fear and a cause of shame. While the data suggests between 9% and 20% of teens have themselves re-shared someone else’s nudes, those being shown someone else’s nudes may be as high as 39%.

**Importantly, these numbers underscore that non-consensual sharing exponentially increases the opportunity and threat for viral spread of one child’s image and highlights a critical need for intervention beyond the child who originally took the image.**

Unfortunately, kids whose images have been shared without their consent had negative experiences when they reached out for help, isolating them from support and compounding the harm and risk.

Tech safety tools such as blocking and reporting were well known by participants and used by many. However, there is a significant lack of trust in platform reporting. Forty-one percent of teens felt nothing would happen if they reported inappropriate images to a platform, and 63% of those who had shared their own SG-CSAM agreed.

Figure 2 | Have you ever been shown or sent a nude photo or video of someone your age without that person’s knowledge?



More challenging still when it comes to reporting, is navigating coercive solicitations, including situations where strangers may be using grooming tactics. One participant shared that after reporting a user who asked “Do you send nudes?” to the platform, she was told they could not remove him because there was “no explicit content on the profile.”

In addition to inaction, significant attitudes of victim blaming exist. Participants were split on who was to blame if intimate images were leaked. More than 1 in 3 teenage girls and 4 in 10 teenage boys exclusively blame the child in the photo. These numbers increase to nearly 50% when including those who

say blame is shared but it’s predominantly the victim’s fault. Even among those who have shared their own SG-CSAM, 39% say the person in the photo is exclusively or mostly to blame if photos are leaked.

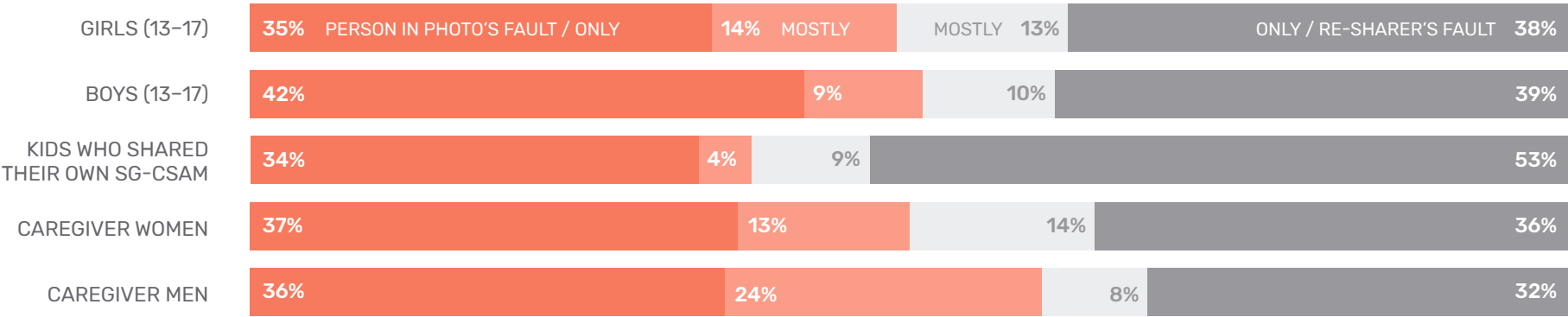
This victim-blaming mentality is reinforced, and perhaps even taught, by the adults around them. More caregivers mostly or exclusively blame the person in the photo (55%) than the person who non-consensually re-shared the images.

Caregivers often fall back on scare tactics, including blaming and shaming victims of online abuse. While intended to protect, this approach only leaves their kids more vulnerable. As a result, many kids are left feeling afraid to turn to caregivers in the moments they most need support for fear of judgement, misunderstanding, or punishment.

*“They would have to answer to how nude photos of them were taken in the first place, let alone ended up online.”*

— MAN, 40-49, WHITE

Figure 3 | If a nude photo or video of someone gets out, who is to blame?







## Conclusion

Additional questions remain to understand how to best combat the harms of SG-CSAM, including the role of the gender of the victim in attitudes of blame, the unique vulnerabilities and experiences of groups such as LGBTQ+ youth, and understanding the distinct pathways and tactics of online grooming.

However, the results of this research highlight a critical need to have a more nuanced conversation around SG-CSAM. Distinct from grooming interventions, our strategy to safeguard kids from the harms of sexting must acknowledge that there may not be a child abuser driving the production of this content, but a typical teenager - driven by curiosity and naturally inclined to taking risks. Interventions must account for this and meet kids where they are, empower them with the knowledge to navigate risky online experiences, and support them if things go wrong.



Understanding the complexities of the intersection of technology and child sexual abuse allows us to develop the best interventions 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.

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#### THANK YOU

We are grateful to kids and caregivers who took time to participate in our survey. Without their gracious participation, we would not be able to share these key insights about Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material.

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