



ChildSafeNet

Enhancing Parental Roles in Protecting Children from Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Note: This summary is meant for Tech Coalition members as a resource to learn more about findings from this research. If you are



Introduction

ChildSafeNet



Project Name	Enhancing Parental Roles in Protecting Children from Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
Research Focus	Exploring parents' perspectives in protecting children aged 6 to 17 years from online sexual exploitation and abuse and identifying appropriate technological solutions in the Nepalese socio-cultural context.
Time	2023-2024
Geographic Focus	Nepal

Grantee Research Overview

ChildSafeNet is a Nepal-based NGO established with a mission to make digital technology safer for children and young people. ChildSafeNet works to raise awareness on safer use of the internet and digital devices to protect children and young people from internet addiction, online sexual abuse and exploitation, cyber-bullying, phishing, gaming addiction and to promote digital literacy among children, young people, caregivers, teachers, community workers, CSO members, police, media, and other stakeholders.

ChildSafeNet focuses on partnership, synergy and sharing of technical and financial resources for protection of children and young people. This also includes making these groups' use of technology safer. They work with children, youth, families, government, police, media, private sector duty-bearers and other partners. Its strategy encompasses advocacy, awareness, capacity building and partnerships.

The rapid development of technology has expanded the role of parents in the digital world. As the internet becomes an integral part of children's lives, it has become equally critical for parents to actively protect their children from online risks, particularly, online sexual exploitation and abuse. In Nepal, a significant proportion of adolescents, with 56.6 per cent of girls and 67.4 per cent of boys aged 15 to 19 years old, used the internet regularly for communication, learning and entertainment[1]. The COVID-19 pandemic further increased children's online activities, while at the same time, heightening the associated risks. Disturbingly, ChildSafeNet's study during the pandemic revealed that among children, one in four females and one in ten males experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse, including, receiving sexual content and abusive messages from strangers, and blackmailing[2]. The study also revealed that parents were not much engaged in guiding online habits of children. As such, understanding the attitudes and behaviours of parents regarding digital safety became crucial to letting children enjoy their digital rights while ensuring their safety.

Despite the increasing risks and the concerning child sexual exploitation statistics, the gap remains in understanding parental roles in the digital age. According to a pilot survey by ChildSafeNet (2022) among 100 parents, only 19% parents perceived the internet as safe for children, while only 17.5% used online safety parental apps or tools. Yet, 95.3% of parents believed that they need more knowledge on online safety to keep children safe online. Parents were also concerned about online harms against children, particularly, befriending strangers online, exposure to sexual contents, online/offline child sexual abuse, online grooming, being contacted for sexual abuse, and meeting strangers after online interactions.[3]

ChildSafeNet's research, therefore, focuses on parents – aiming to explore their knowledge, attitude, and practices towards online risks for children, with a focus on protecting children from online sexual exploitation and abuse. The study team also seeks to determine their preferences regarding effective technological solutions that can mitigate online risks and facilitate online learning and communication. The goal is to empower Nepali parents, through collaboration with the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, and the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund, and other stakeholders. This study represents the first of its kind in Nepal, aiming to capture the vital role of parents as the primary caregivers in online protection.

The primary goal of this research was to explore parents' perspectives in protecting children aged 6 to 17 years in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts from online sexual exploitation and abuse and to identify appropriate technological solutions in the Nepalese socio-cultural context.

More specifically, the objectives of the research were:

1. To understand the knowledge, attitude, perception, and practices of parents in protecting children from online sexual exploitation and abuse
2. To delve into the parents' perceived parental roles in reporting online child sexual exploitation and abuse, and supporting child survivors
3. To plan awareness and technological interventions for enhancing parental roles in protecting children from online sexual exploitation and abuse

[1] Government of Nepal, Ministry of Health and Population and New Era (2023). *Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2022*.

[2] ChildSafeNet (2020). *Rapid Assessment on Changed Online Behaviour during COVID-19 Lockdown in Nepal*.

[3] ChildSafeNet (2022). 'Pilot Assessment of Parental Roles in the Digital Age.'

Key strategies

- Advocate with the duty-bearers on making children's use of technology safer

- Raise social awareness of parents, teachers, children's care-givers, children, youth, social workers, police, lawyers, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and media
- Train groups of child and youth digital leaders to raise awareness on cyber safety and provide support to children and young people
- Partner with schools, child/youth clubs, parents' associations, teachers, ISPs, media, I/NGOs, UN agencies and other like minded individuals and organizations

Methodology

Parents are at the centre of the study, to understand their knowledge, attitude, perception and practice on protecting children from online child sexual exploitation and abuse; recommending technological solutions and interventions to enhance parental roles in protecting children online.

The research has three stages:

- An online survey targeting 900 parents
- Focus Group Discussions - 10 with parents and 6 with children
- Key Informant Interview - 10 Stakeholders

Online survey

The study included a cross-sectional survey with 900 parents of children aged 6 to 17 years old, using Computer-Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) with Kobo Toolbox. The survey gathered demographic information, parents' knowledge on children's online activities, perceived online risks and threats, online safe behaviours, challenges in protecting children online and technological solutions and awareness needs to support parents to keep children safe online.

Qualitative data collection

The research team collected qualitative data from parents of children aged 13 to 17 years, through focus group discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews with relevant stakeholders. FGDs gathered information from parents on their perception, knowledge, and attitude on online risks for children, factors guiding their parenting style, digital literacy and ways technological coalitions and other stakeholders could help them to keep children safe online.

There were 10 FGDs with parents, including single mothers, father's group, parents taking adult literacy classes, low-income parents, parents of children with Down syndrome, etc. Another set of FGDs included 6 FGDs with children aged 13-17 years from child clubs, community school children, children with physical disabilities, and queer children. It explored their perception on positive parenting in the digital age, ways their parents communicate with them for them to openly discuss with parents on online safety and risks. The team conducted 10 key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders, such as service providers and parents of child survivors.

Unique approach

The study is inclusive of parents and children from different gender, age, social, cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds. Our focus for data collection encompasses diverse locations and diverse communities within the socio-cultural landscape of Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts of Nepal.

ChildSafeNet trained the field researchers in a three-day workshop, who conducted a paperless one-on-one survey involving 900 parents. This initiative served to raise awareness among parents about the issue while also ensuring accurate responses.

The data collection was done in collaboration with schools, colleges, child clubs, and communities in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts. ChildSafeNet leaflets about online child sexual exploitation and abuse were distributed among the collaborators after every segment of data collection. This helped in sensitising the subject matter within the specific groups.

In Focus Group Discussions, participatory visual methods using mapping exercises, like mapping social media usage, online risks and safety measures using charts and sticky-notes were also incorporated to encourage active involvement. The team also used ChildSafeNet's public service announcement (PSA) videos to understand the attitudes and perceptions of parents towards OSEC. The used videos were linked [here](#) and [here](#).

Key findings

- 45 percent of children owned personal devices (Smart phones, computer, tablet, gaming console etc.)
- 34 percent of children had a personal account in Social Media. While 29 per cent used a family account, where the mother's account was the most used by children, rather than other family member's accounts.
- There was a connection between parents' and children's use of the internet and digital devices. The higher the parents engaged in digital devices, their children also tended to use them more. Conversely, when parents used them less, the usage also decreased among children. Among the children who had a personal online account, it was very concerning that 59 of them were below 13 years old, and had opened their own accounts without parental supervision.
- Majority of parents reported that they were aware of their children's online circle, which included family, relatives, friends and community people. Yet, few parents were also concerned about their children's engagement with strangers online.

- The posting of photos of their children and sharing personal information decreased with age of the child, where older teens were very sensitive of their privacy being exposed by parents through social media.
- 38 percent of parents reported setting digital rules in the house. The rules decreased with the age of the children, as it was difficult to impose rules on older teens. In a multiple choice, 78 percent resorted to having strict digital time-limit, while 65 percent practiced restricting the use of phones. Only a few used parental controls and privacy settings to protect children from OCSE.
- Only 15 per cent reported having discussed OCSE with their children. Parents tend to discuss OSEA with their older adolescents (14-17 years in the study). Among the 85 per cent who did not discuss such topics, the majority cited concerns of age-inappropriateness and a lack of knowledge of how to engage in such conversations with their children, feeling of discomfort and responsibility of the school to do so.
- Parents perceived engaging with strangers online as the most risky online behaviour, followed by watching sexual contents, and leaking sexual content of children.
- An alarming 94 per cent of parents have never used any technological tools for online child protection. Despite this, 69 per cent still believed that in-person digital safety awareness programmes conducted by experts could be effective, while around 30 percent of parents considered public service announcements (PSA) videos, podcasts, mobile applications, paid online/offline courses, websites, pamphlets, and others as effective means of learning.

Applications for industry:

- Tech coalition and the national, and regional IT companies can use the findings and the evidence-based interventions of best practices as well as the parents' preferred media (apps, videos, social media contents) and methods for educating parents on online safety.
- The Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) - the internet regulatory body in Nepal, can develop and implement policies to educateS parents on keeping children safe online. They can also use their internal resources to develop technological solutions and training & awareness content.
- The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) can incorporate parental education to keep children safe online within the Digital Nepal Framework.
- ChildSafeNet will develop a handbook and leaflet for parents to keep children safe online.
- De-contextualisation – Governments and development partners in South Asia and other regions can develop awareness, education and advocacy initiatives using the findings of the research, with possible adaptations to local languages and contexts.

Key asks

The study has pointed out separate strategic recommendations focused for different key stakeholders on online child protection, including, for parents, government and policy makers, police, internet service providers and tech-companies, for civil society organisations, for schools, and for children themselves.

Publications

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Contact details

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<https://www.childsafenet.org/>

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The Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund is investing in knowledge and research to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). The Tech Coalition and Safe Online joined hands in 2020 to collectively work to support knowledge and research towards ending digital harms against children. The Fund is continuing its focus on innovative research that produces actionable insights to impact product and policy development, with a priority given to research that can help inform the technology industry's approach to combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse.