

DISRUPTING HARM IN BRAZIL

Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Frequently asked questions (FAQ)

1. What is this report about and what is its significance?

This is Brazil's first comprehensive study on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Drawing on the voices of children, caregivers, frontline workers, justice professionals and law enforcement, it uncovers a stark reality: this form of abuse is happening across the country, and most of it remains hidden.

In Brazil, technology is increasingly being used to facilitate the sexual exploitation and abuse of children – often in ways that remain hidden or misunderstood. The *Disrupting Harm* study found that **in just one year, almost 1 in 5 (19%) internet-using children aged 12–17 were subjected to some form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse.**

Most cases occurred through social media and messaging apps such as Instagram and WhatsApp, and nearly half involved someone the child already knew, challenging the idea that this harm is driven mainly by strangers. **These findings highlight how protecting children in Brazil does not require starting from scratch. It requires acting decisively on what we already know works – listening to children, supporting families, holding platforms accountable, and making sure existing systems work together.**

2. What is Disrupting Harm?

Disrupting Harm is a pioneering global initiative launched in 2019 to uncover how digital technologies are used to exploit and abuse children – and to equip countries with the evidence needed to stop this violence. Funded by Safe Online and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL, and UNICEF Innocenti, the project has already generated critical insights in 13 countries. By 2026, it will have delivered national-level data in **25 countries** across six regions.

In each country, *Disrupting Harm* maps how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happens, identifies risk and protection factors, and provides an evidence-based roadmap for governments and partners to act. The findings are already shaping stronger laws, prevention campaigns, and child protection systems around the world.

3. What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse refers to any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse **where digital technology plays a role** – such as grooming, image-sharing, sexual extortion, livestreaming, or blackmail. It can happen entirely online or shift between online and in-person interactions. In some cases, abuse occurs entirely in-person but is recorded and shared digitally.

The *Disrupting Harm* survey looked at the following:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex
- Requests for sexual content
- Use of fake, AI-generated sexual images
- Sharing or threats to share sexual images
- Offers of money or gifts for sexual content or meetings
- Threats or blackmail to force sexual activity
- Livestreamed sexual abuse or exploitation

4. How widespread is this issue in Brazil?

According to the household survey, **1 in 5 children (19%) aged 12–17 in Brazil had been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in just one year.** Scaled up to the overall population of 12-17-year-old internet-using children in Brazil, **this represents around 3 million children.** In **66%** of cases, the exploitation and/or abuse occurred online (e.g. via social media or online games).

The findings underline the urgent need for:

- **Clear, accessible information for children and families** on how to recognise abuse and where to seek help
- **Efforts to challenge harmful social norms and victim-blaming attitudes** that prevent children from disclosing abuse
- **Better coordination between government, child protection services, schools, and the technology sector** to ensure timely protection, reporting, and support

5. How does Brazil compare to other countries (regionally, globally) on this issue?

The proportions of children being subjected to these types of exploitation and abuse in Brazil are similar to those found in the other countries of the region, involved in the study. Through the research we identified many good practices in Brazil, such as the special deposition process and the Digital Statute, which show Brazil's commitment to keeping platforms accountable for failures to safeguard children who use their services. However, we also identified room for improvement; such as challenges in limiting the number of times that a child must recount the exploitation or abuse.

6. Who carries out this abuse? Are strangers the main threat?

Contrary to common belief, in almost half of all cases **(49%) children were exploited and/or abused by someone they already knew:** peers, acquaintances, or even family members. This shows the importance of prevention and education – not just fear of strangers online.

Perpetrators are taking advantage of any leverage they have or believe to have over a child. They use power dynamics that may exist between adults and children or if they are in a position of power in the community.

They take advantage when children lack community support and may not be believed or helped if they speak out about their exploitation and abuse. Perpetrators also exploit children and families facing economic hardship for example through sexual extortion, underscoring the need for prevention strategies in Brazil that address the root causes of economic vulnerability to better protect those most at risk. Relationship and consent education, both in-person and online, must also be part of school curricula to help children understand boundaries and recognize abuse.

7. What role do social media, messaging apps and online games play?

Most cases of abuse take place on popular social media platforms, **Instagram** (59%) and **WhatsApp** (51%) **were by far the most frequent apps where children were targeted on**. Perpetrators, both strangers and those known to the child, use multiple platforms to sexual exploit and abuse children, often starting with platforms that are more public facing to make first contact, like Facebook, Instagram or online games like Roblox, Free Fire or Habbo. They later move their interactions with the child to more private direct messaging platforms (e.g. WhatsApp).

8. Why don't children disclose or report their abuse?

In over a third (34%) of cases of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse, **children did not tell anyone** about it. **Not knowing where to go or who to tell (22%)** and **feeling embarrassed (21%)** were the main reasons children shared for not disclosing. In **12% of cases**, children said **they did not think the abuse and exploitation was "serious enough"** to tell anyone what happened. This points to the normalisation of sexual violence in Brazil. When children did confide in someone they went to a friend or their mother/female caregiver. The interviews with professionals and young people, and the survey data, suggest that **maternal figures in Brazil often play a central role** in responding to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of their children.

Yet not all mothers have access to the resources or support needed to navigate such traumatic and complex situations. Concerningly, when asked what actions they would take if their child experienced something online that bothered or upset them, **27% of parents surveyed said they**

would restrict their child's internet use and 9% said they would punish their child.

Parents often react to online harm by restricting internet access to protect their child. Yet, the fear of losing online connection or of being blamed for the abuse can keep children silent.

9. What are the impacts of abuse and exploitation on children? Does technology change the impact of sexual abuse on children?

The effects of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are **serious, long-lasting, and deeply harmful**. Children subjected to these forms of abuse experience significantly higher levels of **fear, anxiety, shame, and self-blame**, often living with constant distress about whether sexual images of them are being shared or seen by others.

Survey data shows that children who experienced technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse had **anxiety scores 13 percentage points higher** than those who had not. They were also **5.4 times more likely to self-harm** and **5 times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts or attempts**, affecting both girls and boys.

Beyond mental health impacts, professionals and young people described **behavioural and social changes**, including isolation from friends and family, disrupted sleep and eating, declining self-esteem, and difficulties at school. Many children live for years with fear that images may resurface online, which can lead to ongoing anxiety, hypervigilance, and social withdrawal.

Children frequently blame themselves – particularly in cases involving self-generated images – especially when harmful social attitudes suggest that they are somehow responsible for

the abuse. **This self-blame can be reinforced by victim-blaming responses from adults and communities, making recovery more difficult and discouraging children from seeking help.**

Together, these findings show that technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is not “online-only” or temporary harm. It can profoundly affect children’s mental health, wellbeing, education, and sense of safety long after the abuse has ended, underscoring the urgent need for prevention, swift removal of abusive content, and long-term, child-centred support for children and their families.

10. How can parents, caregivers and the wider community help?

Parents, caregivers, and communities play a **critical role in preventing harm and supporting children who experience abuse**. How adults respond in these moments can make a decisive difference in whether children feel safe to seek help.

Creating **safe, non-judgmental spaces** where children can talk about their online and in-person experiences is essential. Children are more likely to stay silent when they fear punishment, disbelief, or losing access to the internet. Listening calmly, reassuring children that the abuse is **never their fault**, and avoiding blame or restrictions as an immediate reaction can help children feel supported and protected.

The wider community – including **schools, health services, faith groups, and community organisations** – also plays a key role. Effective support for children requires **coordination across health, social, and justice services**, yet professionals highlighted ongoing challenges with referrals, information-sharing, and follow-up, often due to heavy workloads and fragmented systems. One frontline worker described how children

are frequently referred across regions without continuity of care.

Communities can help by **sharing clear information about available services**, supporting families to access care, and **challenging harmful social norms** – including victim-blaming attitudes and the idea that “online-only” abuse is less serious.

There is also an opportunity for the tech sector to contribute to these prevention and response efforts. Perpetrators often exploit platform features such as the ease of creating fake or multiple accounts, posing as peers, and easily identifying children’s profiles to target. Addressing these systemic design vulnerabilities – through stronger safeguards, better reporting tools, and proactive detection and removal – can make it much harder for perpetrators to repeatedly target children.

When responses are informed, compassionate, and coordinated, communities can reduce harm, support recovery, and help prevent abuse from continuing or recurring.

11. What needs to change in Brazil’s justice system to better protect children?

Brazil has a strong legal foundation to protect children who experience sexual violence, including **Lei da Escuta Protegida**, which was designed to ensure that children are heard in ways that prevent further harm and re-traumatization.

However, the findings show that **the problem is not the law itself, but how it is implemented**. In practice, many children are still required to repeat their experiences multiple times to different professionals – which can be deeply distressing and discourage families from pursuing justice. Long delays between reporting abuse and formal hearings can also force children to relive the trauma months or even years later.

What needs to change? Consistent, child-centred implementation of the law. Children should be interviewed only **once, in safe and child-friendly settings, by trained professionals**, and cases should move forward without unnecessary delays. This also requires better training and coordination across police, courts, schools, and child protection services so that technology-facilitated abuse is recognised early and handled appropriately.

When **Lei da Escuta Protegida** is applied as intended – quickly, compassionately, and with the child’s wellbeing at the centre – it can reduce harm, strengthen accountability, and help children and families begin to recover.

Geography and cost can also be major barriers. In a country as large as Brazil, relying only on fixed-location services leaves many families behind.

Transportation challenges and long distances can prevent children from accessing consistent psychological support, especially for families with limited financial resources.

12. What can be done right now to better protect children in Brazil?

There are **practical actions that can be taken immediately** to reduce harm and better protect children in Brazil – many of them using systems and laws that already exist.

- **Make help easy to find**

Children and families need clear, simple information about **where to get help and how to report abuse**. Confidential and anonymous reporting options (e.g. **Dial 100**) should be widely promoted, so children are never left unsure of where to turn.

- **Respond with support, not blame**

How adults react when a child speaks up matters. Children are more likely to seek help when they are **believed, listened to calmly, and reassured that abuse and exploitation is never their fault**. Punishment, disbelief, or cutting off internet access can silence children and allow harm to continue. Share practical guidance and support with parents and caregivers so they can respond appropriately and through a trauma-informed perspective.

- **Make digital platforms safer for children**

Most abuse in the study occurred online. Social media and messaging platforms need **stronger child safety features, clearer reporting tools, and faster removal of abusive content**, as well as better cooperation to stop harmful material from spreading across platforms.

- **Use existing laws as they were intended**

Brazil already has strong child-protection laws, including **Lei da Escuta Protegida**. Applying them consistently – so children are heard **once, in safe and child-friendly settings, and without long delays** – can reduce re-traumatization and improve access to justice right now.

- **Strengthen coordination and access to care**

Children need coordinated support across **health, education, social services, and justice systems**. Expanding transportation support, decentralizing services, and investing in frontline workers can make care accessible to families who currently face distance, cost, or capacity barriers. Assigning clear institutional responsibility for coordinating responses, to avoid cases falling between systems.

13. How can the media help?

Media professionals are key allies in protecting children.

- **Avoid victim-blaming, including through the use of appropriate terminology, and protect children's identities.** Ensure that reporting does not inadvertently place any responsibility on a child for the abuse/exploitation they were subjected to. Avoid details that could reveal their identity.
- **Focus on systemic issues, not the child's actions.** Reporting should highlight perpetrators, harms, and gaps in protection rather than framing the story around "shame."
- **Avoid sensationalism and graphic detail.** Excessive details about abuse can further harm children and risk revealing their identity. Trauma-informed language that does not minimize or normalize abuse is key.
- **Respect legal safeguards and investigations.** Follow laws and ethical standards within media protecting children victims of crime and avoid publishing information that could interfere with cases.
- **Share information about support services.** Where possible, include helplines and reporting channels so children and families know where to seek help.

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