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# Policy Brief

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## Effectively Protecting Children and Adolescents from Sexualized Violence in the Digital Space

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Children and adolescents have a right to digital participation and empowerment while also having the right to comprehensive protection from sexualized violence. However, in the digital space, they are still largely defenseless against many dangers. Only when the protection against sexualized violence is implemented as a priority can children and adolescents fully thrive in the digital world. This paper calls on European policymakers to make this protection a priority and to establish clear measures for prevention, awareness, and education.

In 2022, the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#) (NCMEC) analyzed 32 million reports worldwide concerning depictions of sexualized violence against minors<sup>1</sup>. This represents an 87 percent increase since 2019. The [Internet Watch Foundation](#) also shows a continuous increase in particularly severe depictions of sexualized violence, including penetrative sexual acts, sexual activities with animals, or sadistic content. From 2022 to 2023 alone, these cases increased by 23 percent. Beyond the distribution of such content, the overall picture is alarming: [In Germany](#), one in four children between the ages of 8 and 17 has already experienced cyber grooming<sup>2</sup> online—boys are now affected as frequently as girls.

Sexualized violence on the internet has become an everyday phenomenon that severely affects children and adolescents. The immediate [consequences for the victims](#) are severe, ranging from mental illnesses to an increase in suicidality. Additionally, the physical, psychological, and sexual violence against children and adolescents generates massive societal and long-term economic costs. Survivors often struggle to find and maintain stable employment, leading to reduced incomes and increased social expenses.

1 In public discourse, these are also known as »child sexual abuse material.« However, the scientific community and experts prefer the term »depictions of sexualized violence,« which we also use. This term emphasizes the severity of the acts and highlights that they constitute violence carried out using sexual means. They are never a sexual experience but always an act of violence.

2 Cyber grooming refers to the process of establishing contact with children and adolescents with the aim of sexualized violence or exploitation.

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# To ensure a childhood free from sexualized violence in the digital space, ECPAT Germany calls for

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## Demand 1

### 01 Prioritizing the Right to Protection in the Digital Space

Protection from violence is a human right. Children and adolescents must therefore be effectively protected from all forms of sexualized violence in the digital space. This requires a comprehensive political strategy that considers all risks and sets clear action priorities.

## Actions Required 01

#### —> Comprehensive Protection Approach

All forms of digital sexualized violence must be addressed, including cyber grooming, the distribution and detection of known and unknown depictions of sexualized violence, sextortion, and livestreamed sexualized violence. The revision of the EU directive on the protection of children from sexualized violence provides a solid foundation. To achieve comprehensive protection, strong positions from the Parliament and the Council are needed, ensuring no compromises at the expense of child welfare and affected individuals.

#### —> Awareness and Prevention

Political measures should not focus solely on intervention and law enforcement but must also promote preventive approaches. EU-wide and national campaigns should be supported to raise awareness among the general population about risks and protective measures. Various target groups—including parents, guardians, children and adolescents, and professionals—must be reached through tailored campaigns

#### —> EU Strategy ›Better Internet for Kids‹

Strategy must be continuously adapted and expanded to consider new technological developments and opportunities in the digital space regarding their risks and benefits. Additionally, monitoring the implementation at the national level of member states is necessary. Children, adolescents, and survivors of sexualized violence should be actively involved in evaluations and further developments.

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## 02 Holding Companies Accountable

Digital platforms bear a crucial responsibility to protect children and adolescents from violence. This responsibility must be reinforced through binding political regulations. The Digital Services Act (DSA) is an important regulation for large platforms and social networks. However, small platforms, which also pose significant risks to child protection, are not covered under the DSA. Children and adolescents are often among the early users of new platforms, which frequently have lower security standards and fewer resources for content and report monitoring. Perpetrators exploit these security gaps to commit crimes.

### —> Targeted Risk Assessments

Legal requirements and guidelines should compel companies to conduct effective risk analyses and assessments of their products and platforms before market launch. Regular risk analyses and the implementation of targeted measures to reduce the risks of sexualized violence against children and adolescents must be mandatory for all platforms. The proposed [Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) regulation](#) could serve as an effective tool in this regard.

### —> Child-Friendly Reporting Channels

Easily accessible, understandable, anonymous, and data-secure reporting options should be available, including the ability to upload evidence such as screenshots.

### —> Effective Age Verification

Privacy-friendly and data-minimizing but effective systems must control access to risky services while balancing rights—ensuring that the right to protection does not come at the expense of the right to participation for children and adolescents.

### —> Children’s Rights-by-Design

Responsible and sustainable technologies and applications must consider all children’s rights in their design and development, including protection, empowerment, and participation rights. This includes banning addictive designs and manipulative algorithms. Comprehensive transparency obligations for companies are necessary to ensure implementation.

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### 03 Strengthening International Cooperation

Combating digital sexualized violence requires coordinated, cross-border measures involving all relevant stakeholders.

—> EU Competence Center

Establishing a central EU competence center to evaluate and approve technologies for detecting and preventing digital violence and coordinating global collaboration, as proposed in the CSA regulation.

—> Efficient Exchange Structures

International cooperation must be structured efficiently and based on a multi-stakeholder approach. Law enforcement agencies, judiciary, civil society, academia, and industry must be equally involved to develop sustainable and comprehensive solutions.

—> EU Survivor Council

Establishing an EU Survivor Council to integrate the perspectives of affected individuals and support decision-making processes at the EU level. This should be incorporated into the ongoing negotiations on the CSA regulation.

### 04 Advancing Effective Law Enforcement and the Use of Technology

The use of existing, new, and evolving technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) in justice and law enforcement, plays a key role in combating sexualized violence in the digital space. The rapidly growing volume of depictions of sexualized violence poses a central challenge in rescuing and supporting affected children. To combat these crimes effectively, innovative technologies, clear legal frameworks, and specialized resources are essential.

—> Detection and Prevention

AI-powered technologies should be used to identify known and unknown depictions of sexualized violence, detect cyber grooming and sextortion, and prevent livestreaming of sexualized violence. The revision of the [CSA directive](#) is crucial to enable the use of technologies that are already applied in other areas of crime prevention (e.g., organized crime) for combating sexualized violence as well.

—> Promotion and Provision of Modern Technologies

Supporting research and development to improve AI applications for prevention and law enforcement and making these technologies available to relevant actors across the EU and globally.

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—> Training and Resources

Specialized training and adequate resources for police and judiciary to effectively prosecute digital crimes. These measures should be sustainably integrated into training and education systems.

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General Demand

Cross-sectoral responsibility: Use of AI and New Technologies

There is a need for legal clarity through clear regulations that prioritize the protection of children and adolescents in the digital space and ensure the ethically responsible use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI solutions must be privacy-compliant, transparent, and responsibly used by both public and private actors.

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## ECPAT Germany

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ECPAT Deutschland e.V. is a nationwide alliance of 25 organizations, aid agencies, and counseling centers dedicated to protecting children from sexual exploitation. ECPAT works in politics, justice, business, and education and collaborates with governmental and non-governmental partners to raise awareness, develop preventive measures, and establish legal frameworks to protect children from sexualized violence, exploitation, and human trafficking. The organization was founded in 2001 and is part of the Bangkok (Thailand) based international ECPAT network.

More information  
is available on  
[www.ecpat.de](http://www.ecpat.de)

**Lea Peters**

Policy specialist digital child protection  
ECPAT Germany  
[peters@ecpat.de](mailto:peters@ecpat.de) +49 160 3402128

**Antje Monshausen**

Managing Director  
ECPAT Germany  
[monshausen@ecpat.de](mailto:monshausen@ecpat.de) +49 1511 5620404