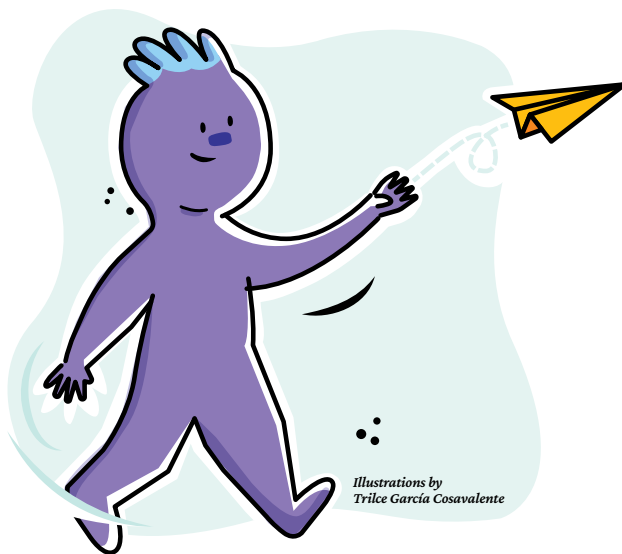




Listening to Young Voices: Recommendations for Including Children in Investigations of Online Sexual Abuse

These recommendations are based on insights gathered within the framework of the ELPIS Project in a task led by Children First, Scotland's national children's charity in collaboration with HEUNI, the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control. The project involved listening to individual children and young people with direct experiences of online sexual harm, as well as engaging with broader groups of children to understand their views on online harm and professional responses. The recommendations reflect the voices, preferences, and lived experiences shared by participants during these sessions. For more information on the methodology and a more detailed description of the children's views, please see "Children and young people feedback summary" at <https://www.childrenfirst.org.uk>



Illustrations by
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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. VALUE OF A TRUSTED ADULT/ORGANIZATION:

- Children emphasized the critical importance of having a trusted adult to rely on throughout the process.
- Trusted individuals should be a person the child feels comfortable with, be it a family member or friend accompanying them, or a professional whose task it is to support the child throughout.
- Professionals should adopt a patient, empathetic, and non-judgmental approach. For example, some children found that support workers who waited until they were ready to share were more effective in helping them feel safe and respected.

"Children First workers are sweet, don't push you for answers, and wait until you're comfortable enough to talk about it." — Changemakers Group.

- Children also appreciated when professionals were approachable and "talked like a friend, not too professional," as it created a more relatable and understanding dynamic.

2. GOING AT THE CHILD'S PACE:

- Professionals should allow children to lead the process, taking breaks and ensuring that sessions are not rushed. This approach helps children feel in control and prevents feelings of being overwhelmed.
- Investigations should be tailored to the child's needs, using clear, simple language to explain complex procedures. For example, professionals could explain the process over multiple meetings to help children better understand and feel more confident.
- Offering flexible ways for children to express themselves, such as drawing or writing was also emphasized. This can help ensure that every child is supported in a way that suits their unique needs:

"...Same support and help but sitting down to draw, write, what they like." — 14-year-old girl.

"I would have liked it if they came out a couple of times to explain it. I would have liked it if I could have asked more questions." — 14-year-old girl.

"Take it [sharing your story] slow if you want." — Changemakers Group.

3. IMPORTANCE OF FEELING HEARD:

"If you aren't [listened to] what's the point?" ... "Let her tell her story – it's her story." ... "She has the right to tell her story and a right to be listened to". – Aberdeen girls group

- Children repeatedly stressed the importance of feeling heard and respected throughout the process, which professionals can achieve by demonstrating active listening skills, showing they take the child seriously and treating them with empathy:
 - Maintain eye contact, sit attentively, and use body language to convey understanding.
 - Repeat what the child has said to confirm understanding and show that their words are valued.
 - Respond empathetically and validate their emotions without making judgments.

One young person reflected that professionals should actively listen, engage meaningfully, and validate their feelings:

"Being listened to – this looks like someone responding to what you say or them adding on to what you say. Repeating what you've said in their own words." — Changemakers Group.

"In real life, it should be a priority for the police to help young people who experience online sexual harm". – Aberdeen girls group

- Failing to provide this kind of support can lead to feelings of dehumanization and detachment. For example, a 17-year-old shared how her experience of being a victim left her feeling reduced to her trauma:

"You are a thing that something happened to. I was just a victim, nothing more." — 17-year-old girl.

- Professionals should approach conversations as collaborative discussions, showing genuine interest and treating the child as a key person in their own case.

"It's how you engage in conversation – like you have an interest in this conversation, like a stakeholder in business." — 17-year-old girl.

4. POLICE RESPONSE:

"Police should respond to the legal parts, but interviews and conversations should happen somewhere safe, like Bairns Hoose." — Changemakers Group.

- Children recommended that police interactions be sensitive and avoid creating intimidating or overwhelming situations. This can include:
 - Scheduling visits at appropriate times, such as midday, rather than early morning or late at night and informing about the visits beforehand.
 - Arriving in unmarked cars and avoiding uniforms to reduce the atmosphere of formality and fear.

"She should be kept in the loop directly or through her parents or trusted adult"

"Both the phone and in person would be good."

"Police should come out to see her so she can ask questions about what's happening."

"The Police should be clear on what the next steps are." — Aberdeen girls group

- Direct communication with the child is essential in cases where they feel sidelined or unheard. One young person emphasized that police should speak to them directly rather than going through their parents or guardians, especially when the harm directly involved them:

“Direct communication with me, not my Mum because it happened to me.” — 17-year-old girl.

- It’s important for police officers to clearly communicate next steps and show that they respect the child’s perspective. Failing to do so can lead to mistrust and a sense of alienation from the process.

“They made me feel disrespected because they got my hopes up that they’d do something but then came back and said I shouldn’t have sent it [photo].” — 14-year-old girl.

5. HOW PROFESSIONALS CAN MAKE CHILDREN FEEL INCLUDED:

Building Trust:

Create a safe and welcoming environment where children feel emotionally and physically secure.

Empowerment:

It is critical to let children decide who should be informed about their situation. Participants strongly agreed that children and young people should have control over disclosures, with clear boundaries set around involving others.

“Have control over who gets told.” — Changemakers Group.

Additionally, wider family members do not always need to be informed, as excessive questioning or attention from family can feel overwhelming and intrusive.

“They [family] all just keep asking, are you ok, it’s too much.” — Changemaker.

Consistency:

Professionals should maintain regular, predictable communication with children about what is happening in their case. Providing updates at every stage helps children feel included and reassured.

Respect and Dignity:

Approach children with respect for their individuality, boundaries, and feelings. This includes recognizing their bravery and validating their emotions.

Age-Appropriate Support:

Tailor interactions to the child’s developmental level, using child-friendly language and tools (e.g., flashcards or activity sheets) to explain complex processes.

“Being age appropriate but still explaining a concept to its true form.” — Changemakers Group.

“Ask questions. They give you eye contact. They sit properly.” — 10-year-old child.

Professionals should also acknowledge and celebrate the child’s resilience, showing appreciation for their courage in sharing their story.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

PROMISE ELPIS. Adapting multidisciplinary response and interagency collaboration to meet the specific needs and requirements arising in the context of child sexual violence online.

- Leveraging extensive collective experience in promoting and implementing best practices in Barnahus, the PROMISE ELPIS project advocates for multidisciplinary and interagency models supporting child victims and witnesses of sexual violence. The project places particular emphasis on specialized interventions and practice excellence in cases with a presumed online component of sexual violence.
- The overall objective is to ensure early identification, adequate assistance, protection and access to child-friendly justice, with specific emphasis on cases where online technology is an integral element to the abuse.
- The target group of the project include professionals in law enforcement, judicial authorities, social services, mental and physical health services.
- In Greek mythology, Elpis is named as the spirit of hope. Hope is an important aspect of our work. We hope that with the right support at the right time, children and families who have experienced hurt, and harm can recover and go on to live full lives.



Checklist for professionals investigating online child sexual abuse for encountering victims and ensuring the inclusion of children's views based on the Lundy model of child participation

1. Space (Safe & Inclusive Environment)

- ✓ Ensure the child has access to a trusted adult or organization for support.
- ✓ Create a welcoming, calm, non-judgmental, and patient atmosphere.
- ✓ Use settings that feel comfortable and familiar, rather than overly formal or intimidating.
- ✓ Use child-friendly, age-appropriate language.
- ✓ Avoid overwhelming children with excessive attention or pressure from family or professionals.

2. Voice (Child-Led Process & Expression)

- ✓ Let children lead the process—ensure they feel in control of their experience.
- ✓ Allow children to share their story at their own pace, taking breaks when needed.
- ✓ Avoid pushing for answers—wait until the child is ready to talk and accept their right not to talk should they choose to refrain from talking.
- ✓ Offer multiple opportunities for children to ask questions and clarify concerns.
- ✓ Validate children's emotions, ensuring they feel heard and respected.

3. Audience (Being Listened To & Taken Seriously)

- ✓ Professionals should demonstrate active listening (eye contact, body language, repeating key points).
- ✓ Always use open-ended questions rather than suggesting experiences, feelings or concerns for the child.
- ✓ Engage meaningfully in conversations, showing interest and empathy.
- ✓ Ensure police and professionals communicate directly with the child, not just their parents.
- ✓ Keep children informed about next steps in a clear and reassuring manner.
- ✓ Avoid dismissing or invalidating a child's experience—treat their concerns with seriousness. Be clear that you may not have the right idea of the child's concerns.

4. Influence (Children's Input Shapes Their Experience)

- ✓ Empower children to decide who should be informed about their situation, and where this is not possible, discuss the reasons with them.
- ✓ Allow children to have a say in how and where interviews or discussions take place.
- ✓ Involve children in decisions about their case, treating them as key stakeholders.
- ✓ Ensure police interactions are non-intimidating (e.g., civil clothing, unmarked cars, scheduled visits at appropriate times).
- ✓ Maintain consistent and predictable communication about the progress of their case.

