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Dear parents,

Last month we sent a letter out on how can parents help prevent bullying at school. For this wellbeing letter, our topic is about sexual harassment online. It is important that us adults are increasingly aware of this phenomena, so what we can practice having more conversations about online spaces with children and youngsters. This year in Helsinki's Education Division, there is an ongoing project called 'Turvallisesti mediassa ja maailmalla – lapsiin ja nuoriin kohdistuvien seksuaalirikosten ehkäisy'. Digitalization of many social spaces has brought upon us new forms of 'grooming', for example. One way of prevention is increasing awareness, safety skills and emotional skills of young people.

What is sexual harassment online? Some examples include:

- Telling you about sex
- Making inappropriate remarks or comments about your looks or sexuality
- Asking for naked photos or videos, blackmailing with photos or spreading photos forward
- Asking to take off clothes and perform sexual acts online
- Another person taking off their clothes, sending naked pictures of themselves or performing sexual acts in front of you online
- Another person sending you pictures of their genitals or links to porn sites/videos

Online grooming is when someone uses the internet to trick, force or pressure a young person into doing something sexual - like sending a naked video or image of themselves. A 'groomer' is someone who makes an emotional connection with someone to try and make you do things like:

- have sexual conversations online or by text messages
- send naked images of yourself, which is sometimes called sexting
- send sexual videos of yourself
- do something sexual live on webcam
- meet up with them in person

Having conversations with your child about online harassment will increase the probability of them talking to a reliable adult in the future if faced with uncomfortable and distressing situations online. Us as adults have the important task of having conversations and guiding children on what physical and sexual inviolability of oneself and others mean. Even if it feels uncomfortable to us! Sexual harassment and grooming online is hidden crime and most cases never reach authorities. Grooming is a name for when someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them. Children and young people can be groomed online, in person or both – by a stranger or someone they know. When a child is groomed [online](#), groomers may hide who they are by sending photos or videos of other people. Sometimes this'll be of someone younger than them to gain the trust of a "peer".

Not addressing the phenomena does not support children's rights for protection from sexual violence. You can explain to your child (whilst considering their age and developmental stage) what is sexual harassment, violence and grooming and, who can the child turn to if they come across any of these things. Explain that adults are the ones who are responsible for investigating the situation, listening to the child and seeking help. *Remember that when you have a suspicion of, for instance, sexual abuse, contact officials and authorities before investigating too much in depth yourself. Authorities and officials work with people that are trained for investigating suspicions like this without accidentally creating false memories or narratives.*

Emphasizing and repeating how important having conversations on the topic are and teaching your child that they should tell as many adults as needed until they receive the attention they need if they come across something distressful is really important. In addition to telling parents, you can mention other adults at school and safe services online for children and youth. You can, for example, narrate examples of confusing or difficult situations to your child. Adults are encouraged to teach children how to recognize situations that represent harassment or grooming. **It is important to remember that even one-time incidents where the child doesn't reply or engage further where someone has been inappropriate can stick in their mind for a longer time and cause anxiety** – especially if they do not have the tools to deal with the thoughts that arose and do not even understand the concept of sex and sexuality. This is likely in today's world, as younger children too own a smart phone and can sign in to social media apps originally meant for grown-ups.

Social media is not a separate space from children's social life, but it is a part of it. A tip for parents, which might sound self-evident, is to **show interest and curiosity towards your child's social media usage**. Being receptive and interested in what your child shares of their online social life, asking about which services are your child's favorites and what kind of content do they enjoy sharing and watching, as well as asking about how your child participates in different

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groups or communities are good ways of engaging. Ask your child about their positive and negative experiences online, how they usually navigate them, are their profiles public or private, and do they have friends online whom they don't know in person (online friendships can be positive as well!). It is also important to bear in mind the positive outcomes and opportunities social media can carry for children as well, such as peer support, cultivating skills in self-expression, belonging to groups and communities and so on, but as adults we need to support children in online environments similarly to offline ones: by teaching respectful communication skills towards others online.

If you have any comments or thoughts related to this topic, feel free to share them J

Best wishes,

Kira & Ona

Some resources:

<https://www.nuortennetti.fi/seksuaalisuus/seksuaalinen-hairinta-ja-hyvaksikaytto/>

“Kehoni on mun” –series from Yle educates children on their right to their body, safety skills and sexual violence in an appropriate way for children. Link: <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2019/09/02/kehoni-on-minun>

If you have Instagram, I recommend following @suavarten_official. Excellent resources and material for facing different situations online for youngsters (and good knowledge for parents) . Website: <https://loistosetlementti.fi/sua-varten-somessa/>

Blog post on breaking barriers for children to discuss harassment and abuse online : <https://www.mll.fi/blogi/vanhempipura-hairinnasta-ja-ahdistelusta-kertomisen-esteet/>

What to do when a child tells you about harassment? < <https://www.mll.fi/vanhemmille/tukea-perheen-huoliin-ja-kriiseihin/lapsi-kertoo-seksuaalisesta-kalttoinkohtelusta/>