



**THE BEST PRACTICES
IN SUPPORT TO
CHILD VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE
IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT**

The best practices in support to child victims of violence in the digital environment

This document, aiming at mapping the best practices in support to child victims of violence in the digital environment, was developed for the needs of the Project: “Prevention of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Digital Environment in the Republic of Serbia”

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Impressum

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Introduction

A significant part of children's life and activities take place in the digital environment, most often spending time on the internet. A steady development of information and communication technologies, as well as complete availability of the internet to young people, enabled new forms of learning, entertainment and communication, but also new types of risk and violence. Therefore, in the past few years many initiatives have been launched, especially at the international level, to regulate the rights of children and youth in the digital world in order to provide child victims of violence with adequate support (Kuzmanović, Lajović, Grujić and Medenica, 2016). Although there is a general agreement on the positive impact of the internet use on the overall youth development, enabling them to acquire digital skills necessary for life in the twenty-first century, the fact is that young people lack the skills of constructive use of the internet and protection from potential risks and violence on the internet.

Nowadays everyone uses digital technologies, many people are connected to the internet, and surveys still haven't covered the levels of their digital communication skills and digital literacy. A survey conducted by the UNICEF in 2018, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, within the project of "Safe Internet for the Whole Family", indicates that children start using the internet earlier than before, and parents don't have enough knowledge and skills to protect them from possible abuse. We live at times when most children have contacts with digital devices at the age of four, and every fourth preschooler and more than half schoolchildren already possess at least one digital device respectively. Around 70 percent children use telephone independently, 24 percent with someone's assistance, while only 6 percent of children do not use this device.

Unlike the children who quickly and easily get adjusted to the change resulting from digital revolution taking place worldwide, parents slowly get adjusted to the new circumstances and find it difficult to. Attempts to limit the time their children spend on the internet cause conflicts for two thirds of parents, and even one third of respondent parents are not familiar enough with digital devices as to be able to block the contents offered on promotion during the internet use or to prevent their children from leaving "active digital trails on the internet"¹. Two thirds of teachers (68 percent) rarely assist their children when using the internet, and more than a half almost never teach children on how to respond if disturbed by the internet contents or if experiencing digital violence, as indicated by results of the above-mentioned UNICEF survey.

¹ **Digital footprint** is made of traces we leave behind when using the internet. There are **active digital footprint** (which we create deliberately) and **passive digital footprint** (created without the owner knowing). Active digital footprint is a set of all our posts, clicks, likes, saved pages and photos, videos or personal data we willingly made available on the internet.
www.wikipedia.com



Nikčević-Milković (2014) refers to a survey data on 70 percent of children in the USA using the internet before school age, and 84 percent of children having a mobile phone. From 75 to 80 percent of US children aged 10 to 14 have been exposed to abuse through digital communication channels, and 12 percent of children aged 10 to 17 have been aggressive towards other children. In Croatia, 96 percent of schoolchildren possess their own mobile phones. Computers are present in most Croatian homes (95 percent), and 85 percent of schoolchildren have access to the internet at home. Almost half the examined children have access to the internet almost on a daily basis.

An international survey, Global Kids Online, conducted in 2015, organised at the global level by the UNICEF survey office – Innocenti, was focused on the opportunities and rights of children and youth (age from 9 to 17) on the internet, as well as on the risks of digital communication. The survey, which included both boys and girls, as well as their parents, resulted in the following data flagging the widespread use of digital communication channels and threats stemming therefrom:

- 94 percent of primary school students and 99 percent of secondary school students possess mobile phones.
- 89 percent of primary school students and 92 of secondary school students have internet access.
- A total of 62 percent of primary school students and 84 percent of secondary school students have exposed themselves to a risk on the internet.
- Digital violence was suffered by 37 percent primary school students and 66 percent secondary school students.
- A total of 22 percent of primary school students and 30 percent of secondary school students have seen or heard of their peers experiencing digital violence.

This survey also provides data showing that young people undergoing digital violence often remain alone with their problem and do not choose to share it with others, particularly not with adults, the reason being their fear of consequences, among others. A ban on the use of digital devices can sometimes upset a child. Although the other person most often does not get injured in digital communication, research has shown that the consequences of digital violence on psycho-physical health, emotional and social functions as well as on children's behaviour can be very negative.

How upset a victim of digital violence is, can be seen in the affinity between exposure to this type of abuse and suicidal ideas. Persons who have been exposed to digital violence twice as often state that they have attempted suicide (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). One needs to be very cautious here and not jump to the conclusion that digital violence is the only reason for suicide. What we can be sure about, though, is that digital violence enhances stress and suffering in real life and that it can contribute, along with other factors, to a tragic outcome.





Definitions of key terms

According to *Detinjstvo (Childhood)* - Smiljanić (2009) defines childhood as an early stage in human development cycle marked by rapid physical growth and efforts for the child to model roles and responsibilities, mainly through play and formal education. The entrenched position of psychologists is that childhood lasts after infancy until puberty (minimum 18 months, up to 14 years) or until early adolescence (18 to 21 years). Childhood is divided into early (0-6), medium (till adolescence) and late (till the end of adolescence). The term child implies a person under eighteen years of age, which is in accordance with the definition of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Child abuse and maltreatment - Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power².

Digital violence - Hinduja and Patchin (2008) define digital violence as type of abuse referring to action taken by use of digital technologies, with intention and goal of inflicting direct or indirect harm on someone. This includes a wide range of behaviour, such as verbal abuse, anonymous and malevolent calls, blackmail, causing different embarrassing situations for the victim and humiliating someone on the internet or in broadcast media. Besides the term of digital violence, there are other related terms in publications now: electronic violence, violence on the internet, online violence, cyber violence, cyberbullying, etc.

Information technology (IT) – technology using computers to collect, process, store, protect and transfer information. The IT term was joined by communication technologies, because nowadays it is inconceivable to operate a computer if it is not networked, so the term in use is information and communication technology.

Šeparović (1985) provides a definition of *victim of violence* as a natural person whose right or asset has been directly violated or destroyed by a criminal act, while in a broader sense it is any person, legal or natural, whose right has been directly or indirectly threatened, violated or destroyed by a

² Definition adopted at the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention at the World Health Organisation held in Geneva, 1999, the General Protocol



criminal act. The UN Declaration (1985) on fundamental principles of justice for the victims of violence and abuse of power defines victim as a person who has suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States (General Assembly, Res. 40/34). A person may be considered a victim regardless of whether the perpetrator has been identified, apprehended, prosecuted or convicted and regardless of the familial relationship between the perpetrator and the victim.

Safeguards for the victim – measures exacted by the court or police in order to provide protection for the person exposed to violence, by changing the circumstances that can enable the offender to perpetrate multiple violent acts.³ The goal is to stop the process of violence, provide the victim with necessary psychological support and legal aid, as well as to prevent re-victimisation as consequence of sharing and replication of inappropriate material via ICT.

The definition of *secondary victimisation*, provided by Ristanović (1984), means tightening primary victimisation through negative reaction of the social environment and through inadequate or even wrong reaction of law enforcement authorities. In the whole society there is often a tendency to underestimate the victim and persuade them that it is their fault that the crime took place at all. This tendency is present from the immediate environment, via the law enforcement authorities, all the way to the broadest societal structures.

³ OSCE, Catalogue of Advice and Assistance for Domestic Violence Victims



The aim of the document

The aim of this document is mapping and assessing the existing support services for children who have suffered a form of violence in the digital environment, including the best national and international practices and models, in order to provide recommendations for future actions of institutions and professionals in the Republic of Serbia. Mapping organisations and institutions that aim at providing support to children victims was done in order to make a comprehensive overview of protection for children victims of digital violence from victim identification, victim support and empowerment technique and the process of integration and reintegration into the society. The mapping focused on best practices in protection of victims of various forms of violence against children in digital environment.



The document structure

This document provides a theoretical overview of violence, taken stock of through the lenses of traditional and digital abuse of children. As these two terms normally go together nowadays, especially when regards children undergoing a form of violence, it is important to emphasise the similarities and differences, as well as to understand the consequences of both forms on the victim's mental health.

Also, the document takes stock of the research methodology, analysis of contents and questionnaires that lead to certain conclusions. How the mapping was approached, how the interviews were defined and organised, what form of information was collected through the questionnaire, shall be presented in the Methodology chapter. Based on the so-far conclusions, recommendations were made in view of future actions of institutions and professionals working towards adequate support provision to children exposed to any form of violence in the digital environment.

The topic of "Support to Victims of ICT-based violence" is addressed in a separate chapter of the document, and the focus is on recognising violence by both the victim and other persons. The following issues were also covered: stopping the process of violence, reporting, support to the victim during investigation, prosecution or court proceeding, and eliminating the consequences of violence.

Given that digital violence, and in particular the consequences of such violence against children, is still an insufficiently explored social phenomenon, the greatly limited relevant references and credible sources constitute a serious problem. And that is precisely the added value of this document, being one of the first structured and methodologically defines steps towards the solution to the problem.




The theoretical framework of violence against children

All forms of violence, maltreatment, abuse or neglect of children, jeopardising or damaging the physical, psychological and moral integrity of their personality, constitute violation of one of the fundamental rights of child embedded in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that is the right to life, survival and development. Violence against children leads to actual or potential damage of child's health, survival, development or dignity within the relationship which implies responsibility, trust or power. In the twenty-first century, violence against children is divided into traditional and digital.

Traditional violence

Traditional violence is always limited to certain physical areas (school, playground, street, home, places of gathering, etc.). This type of violence against children can be divided into:

1. Child physical abuse – a type of violence leading to actual or potential physical injury of the child. The acts of abuse can be one-off or reiterated. The examples of physical abuse are: kicking, choking, choking, throwing, poisoning, burning, spilling hot water on or exposing the child to hot steam, and the like.
2. Child sexual abuse – involving a child in a sexual activity that it does not fully understand, does not agree to or is not mature for, therefore not able to agree to, or breaching laws or the societal taboos. Sexual abuse of children is manifest as an activity between a child and an adult or another child who, due to its age or development level, is in position to assume responsibility, trust or power, with giving pleasure or meeting the needs of another person as the aim.

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3. Emotional abuse – covers failure to ensure a developmentally adequate, supportive environment, including the availability of the primary/affection figure, so that the child can develop stable emotional and social abilities that suit its personal potential. Emotional abuse also includes acts of disparaging, maligning, blaming for no reason, threatening, intimidating, limiting the child's movement, discriminating, deriding or other forms of non-physical, hostile or rejecting treatment.
 4. Neglect and negligent treatment – comprises failure on the part of the caregiver (parent) or another person who has assumed parental responsibility or obligation to take care of the child and ensure its development in all areas: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, accommodation and safety conditions, all within reasonably available means of the family of caregiver, which can or does cause, with high probability, damage to child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.
 5. Commercial or other forms of child exploitation refer to exploiting child for labour or other activities, to the benefit of other persons. This includes child labour and child prostitution, kidnapping and/or selling children to the ends of labour or social exploitation, exploitative use of children for pornographic shows and materials, etc. Such activities result in damage of child's physical or mental health, education, as well as moral, social and emotional development.


Digital violence

Digital violence is any form of violence taking place through digital technologies (the internet and digital devices) in order to upset, humiliate and inflict damage on another person. Digital violence implies all cases where someone uses electronic devices (mobile telephone, computer, camera) and the internet in order to deliberately frighten, offend, humiliate or by other means hurt another person.

Digital violence is complex in so much as it often implies a fusion of all forms of child abuse – from exploitation, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse, all the way to physical torture. The specificity of this type of violence is a vast audience that can follow the abuse process, as well the permanence of abuse, because the traces of violence remain on the internet forever.

⁴ www.medijskapis-menost.net

Contemporary criminology literature indicates that there are two types of cyber violence nowadays – direct assault and assault through proxies⁴. Direct assault happens when the aggressor:

- 
- Sends upsetting messages via mobile phone, email or chat
 - Steals or changes the email password or chat nickname
 - Publishes private data or falsities on chat, blog, or web page
 - Sends upsetting messages via email or MMS messages on mobile phone
 - Sends viruses to email or mobile phone
 - Sends pornographic contents or unsolicited messages to email or mobile phone
 - Falsely identifies himself/herself or uses the victim's identity or that of a third person, known or familiar to the victim.

Violence through proxy is a very dangerous type of cyber violence because it often includes adults who, quite often, have ill intentions. Violence happens when the perpetrator assaults the victim through a third person who is most of the times even unaware of that.

Digital violence usually happens among young people, however, not too seldom do adults act violently against children and youth on the internet. In that case it is cyber-harassment or cyber-stalking, which constitute criminal acts and are punishable by law. The internet is particularly suitable for adults (sexual predators or violators) with false identities who communicate with younger persons in order to sexually abuse them. That is why sexual digital violence or cyber sexual abuse is being more discussed. The internet enables various ways of sexual abuse (through social networks, chat, chatrooms). The most frequent types of digital violence are:

Grooming – a range of predator-motivated actions, i.e. preparatory acts aiming at establishing contact, maintaining communication and physical access to child. Sexual predators on the internet do not have a clear-cut profile, their backgrounds and age vary, although research indicates that they are mainly male (Wolak, 2008).

Sexting is a form of digital violence including sending or posting internet photos, messages or videos with explicitly sexual contents. Exchange of photos or messages with sexual contents may seem as innocent flirt or fun, but to young people sexting has serious social and legal consequences. Photos can easily get out of control and reach more recipients than originally planned. Then they are mainly used for cyber-harassment or cyber-stalking.

Live streaming of children's sexual abuse is an action that takes place in real time and happens when a child is forced to appear before a web camera and get involved with a sexually explicit behaviour or to undergo sexual abuse. Such contents (video or photo materials) are then transmitted



via live stream to the perpetrator or buyer who has paid for them and who watches or seeks a certain type of abuse to watch in real time.

Pornography – exposure to explicit sexual contents in early childhood can lead to mental disorders of children who often see the very sexual intercourse between adults as a friction of one person against the other. Also, viewing pornographic contents, especially in childhood or teenage stages greatly shape the sexual attitudes and beliefs.

Digital and traditional violence – similarities and differences

Violence, both traditional and digital, constitutes a social phenomenon – a problem in interpersonal relations. However, violence that takes place in the digital environment (mediated by digital devices) is marked by several specific features that make a clear distinction from typical peer violence taking place in direct “face to face” communication, as highlighted by Kuzmanović (2016).

Digital violence is marked by a high level of anonymity of violent person or group. Unlike the traditional forms of violence, persons who harass others via digital media normally hide behind false names and nicknames, telephone numbers, emails or profiles on social networks, which is why Besley (2006) calls digital violence a “cowardly form of peer violence”. Anonymity, on one hand, makes it difficult to establish the true identity of a person (or group) perpetrating violence and encourages violent persons to behave the way they wouldn’t normally behave in direct contact; on the other hand, it enhances the feeling of uncertainty, helplessness, grief and anger of a person suffering from violence.

Another specificity of digital violence is the victim’s constant availability. The internet users can be exposed to digital violence any time (24/7) and anywhere (they don’t feel safe even at home), even when they are not using the internet (for example, a person deletes his/her profile on a social network, but someone else makes a profile using his/her name, this person being ignorant of it).

Many persons can be included in digital violence (by their own or somebody else’s will). Information is rapidly disseminated, so the number of persons involved with digital violence – directly (by posting, liking, sharing or retweeting comments or photos) or indirectly (observing or witnessing) may grow significantly and uncontrollably in a very short period of time. Once posted on the internet, malicious information is hard to destroy and can even be abused again if needed, causing re-victimisation.





Methodology

For the purpose of best practice mapping, two main methodologies for data collection and analysis were employed: the method of theoretical analysis and research method. The method of theoretical analysis was used for studying secondary material. The available professional and scientific literature dealing with the issues of digital violence was analysed, as well as web presentations of organisations and institutions and their communication through other channels of digital communication (social media, blogs, and fora). The analysis results served as a lodestar for designing and conducting the empirical research.

Of scientific methods, the individual method of learning was applied: the method of scientific testing – indirectly through opinion polls (polling directly through data collection tools - questionnaires), analysis, synthesis and comparative method.

Questionnaire and interview

For the needs of collecting data on the scope of activities undertaken by organisations and institutions dealing with support to child victims of cyber violence, a short questionnaire was designed and used as the main survey method, in order to collect the wanted data in a very small and non-representative sample of respondents. Due to the limited number of organisations that took part in the survey (29 questionnaires filled out), data processing was qualitative (the method of induction, analysis, synthesis and description).

Also, meetings were organised with representatives of the organisations and institutions that had replied to the initial email (live and via Skype), where, in a structured interview, they were taken through models of support to child victims of digital violence.



Support to victims of violence in the digital environment

All forms of child violence, harassment, abuse and neglect, jeopardising or damaging the physical, mental and moral integrity of child's personality, constitute violation of one of the fundamental rights of child defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that is the right to life, survival and development.


In the process of mapping the organisations and institutions focused on support to children victims of digital violence, we learnt of the existing intention to prevent violence, but there is an absence of specific measures to support the victim after violence actually happens.

Defining these support measures is precisely the key activity and should result in defining procedures and actions of intervention in protecting children from violence in the digital environment, once it has happened or when happening. Protecting children from this type of violence and providing support to the child having become victim already, is the first step towards keeping their mental health, preventing the victim's stigmatisation and endeavours to prevent social pressure, condemnation and exclusion from social community of their peers.

In order to plan and implement the intervention for child protection in the best way possible, it is necessary to take the following criteria into consideration:

- is violence actually taking place or is there suspicion of violence;
- where is it taking place – is it happening on the internet only or spilling over to the real environment of child;
- who are the participants/actors of violence, abuse and neglect;
- form and intensity of violence, abuse and neglect (Mršević, 2014).

The impression is that at this moment the focus of all entities aiming to support the victims is precisely on information and training on threats accompanying information and communication



technologies, sooner than on defining the procedures of assisting those who have already experienced such threats. Information and training are important, particularly from the aspect of empowering the child victim to recognise violence, but it is also very important to work on defining all other procedures of providing adequate support to the victims.

Training and information are particularly important for instilling an atmosphere where everyone:

- learns, develops and fosters the culture of behaviour and respect of personality;
- has zero-tolerance for violence;
- refuses to be silent about violence;
- develops own responsibility;
- who knows of a violent act is obliged to act.

Recognising violence

Knowledge of violence, i.e. its detection and recognition, is the first step in protecting children from violence. It mostly takes places by noticing or receiving information of violence taking place or by suspicion of violence on the grounds of recognising the outward signs or specific behaviour of child and family.⁵

A child suffering violence or witnessing violence against another child should have enough knowledge to recognise a process of violence, and then also enough courage to react. The 2015 UNICEF survey conducted in Serbia with support of the Institute for Psychological Research of Belgrade's Faculty of Philosophy indicated that around two thirds of children respondents had seen a form of digital violence taking place (recognised a process of violence), but only 1 percent of them reacted – reported it or tried to protect the victim.

The conclusion inferred is that it is necessary to train children in digital literacy within formal education (the internet safety is an integral part of digital literacy, Kuzmanović (2016)). Also, it is important that child has support of adult persons, who need to improve their digital skills too. The commonly known golden rule of any attempt to prevent a certain type of violence is to work with adults first – teachers, social workers, parents, and then children in the end. This sequence is important for several reasons: if we train children first, adults may fail to understand and support them, or even counter them, because they haven't acquired adequate knowledge,

⁵ The General Protocol of Protection of Children from Violence, the Government of the Republic of Serbia



skills and attitudes. Besides, adults should assume the responsibility, to get familiar with this social problem and then help children and youth develop the necessary skills.


Children should be permanently empowered (by education and constant information) to be able to detect violence and respond to it appropriately. Results cannot be achieved through isolated lectures and campaigns, but only in a systematic approach which implies raising awareness of a problem, informing of adequate reaction to the problem, as well as support available to the victims of violence. A growing number of psychologists dealing with media violence present at conferences the assertion that in our region today children find it harder to recognise violence, especially the peer one. Violence in our society has become normal to the extent that children fail to understand what it is, do not notice it, so they need assistance in recognising it and then adequately responding to it. It is necessary to more energetically work on sensitisation of both children and parents, as well as all other factors that can contribute to adequate reaction when this problem is recognised in a community.

Digital violence occurs more often than most children think. Young people are often not aware of being victims of violence themselves, or that they offend others by their behaviour, thus committing digital violence. Children should be supported and encouraged to report cases of digital violence, instead of passively observing abuse in cyber space (Kuzmanović, Lajović, Grujić and Medenica, 2015).

What skills need to be developed with children so they can recognise digital violence?

To start with, it is necessary to develop children's social skills in order to build their capacities to notice when a process of violence takes place, and then to react to it by seeking help for themselves, if they are victims of violence, or for someone they know. The World Health Organisation defines social skills as a set of acquired skills of adjustment and positive behaviour enabling individuals to successfully cope with requirements and challenges that life faces them with every day. Adler, a psychoanalyst psychologist, considers that skills change in accordance with specific social context and include cognitive and emotional elements assistive in causing positive social reactions and avoidance of negative ones. Persons with strong social skills consider themselves ready to achieve their personal, as well as common societal goals, and feel responsible for the care of other individuals. The notion of social skills covers a wide range of dimensions, and Reiter and Brien (1991) noticed that the term describing social capacity includes skills, abilities, motivation, knowledge and personal features, all contributing to efficient social interactions in an environment.





Social skills acquisition is not limited to early childhood, but continues in adolescence too. Peleg (2012) claims that acquiring skills like collaboration, self-expression, empathy and self-control are of key importance for recognising dysfunctional human relationships, disorder in communication and recognising a process of violence. Children oriented to their friends – more involved with interaction, through open and two-way communication and empathy (able to view the world from the point of their friends), openly discuss their dilemmas and challenges and have a high degree of self-control, can more readily notice a process of digital violence (Lapidot-Lefler and Dolev-Cohen, 2014).

How should adults recognise that a child is a victim of violence in the digital environment?

In order to be able to recognise cyber violence against a child, it is necessary to know what we do and allow that makes a child a potential victim. Children are exposed to media influence practically from their birth. As soon as they demonstrate to their social environment an interest in exploring digital devices and media contents placed thereby, parents are ready to pose them in front of media devices (TV set, computer, tablet or mobile telephone) and they start consuming different contents from them.

Initially, children's exposure to media contents is passive – they are only passive observers, consumers of cartoons or music (in the very beginning). As a child grows, it only changes the attitude towards media and becomes their active consumer, and the relation becomes interactive. The child starts playing games on the internet, then uses it to establish contact with other persons, also internet users.

Spending several hours in the internet on a daily bases enhances the probability for a child to be exposed to inadequate and violent contents, the presence of which is growing on the internet. The higher exposure to such contents, the higher tolerance for violence. Compared to television violence, where children are passive viewers of violence, children on the internet enter interactions and their role in violent situations is active (Kuzmanović i Popadić, 2015).

Quite often, while browsing, children can easily and quickly come across very inappropriate contents. The availability of pornographic contents to children is absolute nowadays. Anyone can unimpededly browse various web pages and reach those offering explicit scenes of sexual intercourse. Thus, children's safety on the internet is fully threatened. Younger children do not have the cognitive, rational, emotional or any other capacities to understand those contents and will



certainly perceive them as violent, and the consequences it will cause to their psychological development are immeasurable. While exposed to such contents they feel vexation and confusion. However, the exposure of adolescents to such contents is not insignificant either, especially given that they are still motivated to watch such contents, as they grow mature for their first sexual intercourse during the period of medium adolescence.

Young people suffering digital violence often remain alone with their problem and do not choose to share it with others, especially not with adults, among other reasons because they fear the consequences. A ban on using digital devices may sometimes greatly upset children (Kuzmanović, Lajović, Grujić and Medenica, 2015).

Although there are individual differences in ways of responding, there are some behaviours (deviating from the child's usual behaviour) that can lead adult to conclusion that a child or young person is suffering digital violence.


A child or young person in that situation:

- demonstrates anxiety during or after using the internet;
- unexpectedly changes habits of using digital tools, becomes more cautious and applies additional safeguards;
- avoids spending time with friends, seems absent-minded, is in bad mood, insecure and irritable;
- is not motivated to study, has concentration problems, underperforms in school;
- avoids school, frequently misses classes because schools is not perceived as a safe place;
- uses harmful substances (alcohol, drugs);
- develops various psycho-somatic symptoms (headache, stammering, night urination, stomachache, sudden weight loss or gain, nightmares, suicidal thoughts, etc).

A sensitised adult taking care of the child, focused on its needs, familiar with its habits and usual behaviour patterns, can easily notice change in behaviour which is always the consequence of a problem, stress or crisis that the child experiences. It is important to work on building a trust rapport with the child, based on open and two-way communication, which results in the child reporting the problem once it emerges.

Organisations and institutions the activities of which were analysed in this mapping process are working on raising the awareness of adults of all the challenges that the internet brings to children. A significant number of campaigns have been organised, as well as conferences for parents and teachers, and





advice is available on dozens of web pages in local and foreign languages. This form of education and information is very important as it helps those who take care of children to notice, detect and respond in time, in order to stop the process of violence and provide timely support to victims.

Prevention of further violence

In a situation when a child recognises and reports a form of digital violence it is experiencing, its friend/acquaintance is experiencing or when another person reports violence, it is necessary to respond rapidly in order to stop the violence (The General Protocol on Protection of Children from Violence). Everybody who is informed of a violent process is obliged to react by stopping the violence or asking for help (if they assess that they cannot stop the violence by themselves).

The first step implies ensuring safety for child, talking to the actors (if the child knows the aggressor and abuser), talking with parents and guardians. All these activities follow consecutively after a suspicion of violence arises or such information is received. A child suffering violence through information and communication technologies needs to be provided with support, work with a psychologist or pedagogue, talk to representatives of police, social work centre and prosecutor's office. If digital violence ends with a form of physical abuse of the victim, the child needs to be enabled to see a physician in a health care institution.

In parallel with this process, it is necessary to organise consultations among team members working on support provision to the child victim. Consultations aim at clarifying the circumstances and correctly analyse all the facts of child abuse, to make a risk level assessment and protection plan and avoid confusion and uncoordinated actions that can lead to re-victimisation. In consultations, a detailed, objective description of violence should be presented, without assessments or interpretation, taking heed of the privacy of the child and other participants in violence. Further to that, the roles, tasks and responsibilities of all child support team members should be defined, and a decision on the way of responding and monitoring should be made. It is very important that all participants in the process comply with the principles of confidentiality and protection of the child's best interest. Any team member should be focused on actions to stop the process of violence and prevent further internet dissemination of inappropriate contents on the child victim of violence in the digital environment.

Upon detection of violence and consultations with relevant experts and institutions, it is possible, depending on the seriousness, to undertake the following:

- inform the parents of violence or trusted persons in case of suspected violence in the digital environment,
- agree on the protective measures for child victim,
- take legal action and organise special programme to empower child victim for constructive attitude in violent situations,
- involve the relevant services: psychological and pedagogical service, centre for social work, police, prosecutorial office, health care if necessary,
- monitor the impact of action taken.

Within protective measures activities are planned to ensure reintegration or reintegration into the community for all participants in violence and their safe and quality life in future. Reintegration plans depend on factors such as: type and seriousness of the violent act, consequences of violence against the individual and community, number of participants in violence, etc. Based on these criteria, the level of risk against child's safety is assessed and further steps and procedures are decided.⁶

Reporting digital violence

Children should report any form of violence, including digital violence, to their parents and school – school psychologist, teacher and class master. Depending on the level of violence, the protective action is taken by the teacher and class master alone, the team for protection from violence, i.e. internal protection network, or the external protection network is involved (other institutions: social work centres, police department, health care institutions). The education and pedagogic institution is obliged to report any form of tertiary violence to the competent school administration within 24 hours (Kuzmanović, Lajović, Grujić and Medenica, 2015).

If there is information of sexual abuse of juvenile persons to pornographic purposes, sexual violence on the internet, paedophilia, criminal online contents, or if a juvenile person has received via digital devices any material with explicit sexual contents and threats against safety, it is necessary to inform the Ministry of the Interior. Under the Serbian Family Law (Article 6)⁷ the rights and duties of all children's, health and educational institutions, social welfare, judicial and other state authorities, associations and citizens, to inform the public prosecutor or guardian authority of the reasons to protect the child's rights.

⁶ Child-friendly Guidelines for the Prevention of Violence against Children in the Digital Environment in BiH, (2017). Sarajevo: the International Forum of Solidarity – EMMAUS
⁷ (The Official Gazette of RS, no.18/2005, 72/2011 and 6/2015)



a) Reporting to the National Contact Centre for Children's Internet Safety

Internet violence can be reported through a helpline number 19833, with every report forwarded to the competent institutions, the Ministry of the Interior Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Cyber Crime Unit, which then acts according to applicable regulations and its competences.

b) Reporting a suspicion to the Centre


Reporting a suspicion of child abuse/neglect to the Centre can be done by an individual (citizen or professional) or an institution concerned about the child. The report can be filed in writing or orally, including a phone call, but if a professional reports orally (by phone) it is advised that the oral report be followed by a report in writing within the following 24 hours.

When a professional reports a case to the Centre, it is preferable to discuss his/her concern about the child with its family before filing a report, to ask for the necessary information from the parents and inform them of the intention to report the case to the centre. However, this procedure should be conducted only in cases when such a discussion does not enhance the risk of harming the child, i.e. the further procedure of child protection. The report should contain all data on the child and family known to the professional or the reporting service at the moment, as well as the reasons to suspect child abuse.

All experts, even after the suspicion of abuse and neglect is reported, should actively support the competent authorities and services (the Centre, police, and prosecutor's office) in further process of child protection. They should respond to the Centre's call and prepare for participation in a meeting where the child's condition is discussed and decisions on protective measures and services to be provided to the child and its family are made. They should also be ready to take part in implementation of the protection plan, i.e. provision of agreed services. The experts can have a very significant role in the process of the child's psychological recovery and in stopping the violence cycle. This is why it is important not to lose contact with the child and family established in crisis situation, even after the suspicion is reported to the Centre, but to maintain and foster it.

c) Reporting to the public prosecutor's office or interior affairs authority

If the act that endangered the life or health of a child contains elements of criminal offence to be prosecuted *ex officio*, anyone with knowledge thereof, be them citizens, professionals at an institution or another organisation, is to report the crime.



All national authorities or local self-government bodies, public enterprises and institutions shall report criminal offences that are to be prosecuted *ex officio*, which they have been informed of or learnt about otherwise. In that, they shall provide evidence they are familiar with and take action to keep the traces of criminal act, exhibits that the criminal act was done on or with and other evidence.


In the process of mapping organisations and institutions that aim at supporting the children who suffer digital violence, we have learnt that there are dozens of telephone hotlines for providing support to victims, various online tools to facilitate violence reporting have been developed – from violence report forms on web sites all the way to mobile applications, Facebook applications, shared information about email addresses to report violence to. Yet, the impression is that these are activities without stronghold in system support, with frequent absence of instant psychological support provision, no data on the victim's status and no records of whether the problem has been solved and how. It is necessary to implement prevention and intervention measures at several tiers. If a child suffers digital violence, everybody is bound to react (pedagogic and educational institution, parents, i.e. family, friends who have witnessed violence) in order to stop the violence as soon as possible, ensure the safety of all involved with the violence (persons suffering violence, perpetrating violence or testifying thereof), reduce the risk of re-offending and mitigate the consequences of violence suffered.

Support to child victim during police investigation, prosecution or court trial

Regarding the police and law enforcement agencies in this area, one could say that they do not have much experience, especially in cases where the means of perpetration was a computer, mobile phone or tablet, and the place of perpetration was the internet. All this has caused the lack of adequate training in this area of crime.

Any form of child abuse via ICT should be reported to the nearest police station and charges should be pressed against a known or unknown perpetrator. Also, violence can be reported to the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia, the Cyber Crime Unit, which then acts in accordance with applicable regulations and its competences.

It is important to mention that any material (chat communication, photos, social network profiles, SMS and MMS messages, etc.) should be made available to the law enforcement institution for better and more efficient proceeding. In these cases, "digital evidence" is most frequently collected,



because computers can be used for communication, but also for crime perpetration. Ćosić (2012) defines digital evidence as any information generated, stored or transmitted in digital form, admissible as evidence in court.

The following emanates from the above: in order for digital evidence to be admitted by the court it needs to be admissible, authentic, complete, reliable, convincing and comprehensible. All ways of data collection need to be applied in accordance with legal provisions, otherwise they shall not be admissible either for the court or for the police and prosecution. As any other action, this one also follows certain procedures and principles. The main principles regarding the procedure of digital evidence collection and analysis are:

Principle 1. / The principle of keeping digital evidence/principle of evidence integrity

No action taken by the competent state authorities or their officers shall modify data kept on a computer or another data carrier, which may be subsequently presented in court.

Principle 2. / The principle of competency

In the circumstances when it is necessary to access the original data on computer or another data storage medium, the person accessing original data must be competent for accessing the data and providing grounded explanation of the importance and consequences of his/her activities, irrespective of capacity (police officer, professional or court expert).


Principle 3. / The so-called investigation chain principle

The minutes of expertise and minutes of all actions taken with digital evidence should be well documented and detailed. An independent third party should be able to review the actions and achieve the same results.

Principle 4. / The principle of legality

The person in charge of investigation (police officers, prosecutors, judges, etc.) bears the complete responsibility for ensuring the compliance with law and other principles.

These principles should be universal and applied when collecting digital evidence, especially in cases of sexual abuse of juvenile persons for pornographic purposes, but there are certain principles common to all principles' application: ill-formulated rules and procedures or their absence; lack of training, human resources and equipment; lack of interest of responsibility for their implementation.



The laws on criminal procedures in the Republic of Serbia stipulate the duty of citizens to report criminal acts, but also the duty of official and responsible persons in all authorities at all levels of government, in public enterprises and institutions, as being obliged to take action in order to keep the traces of crime, and to inform an authorised official or prosecutor immediately. Pursuant to this provision, medical professionals, teachers, foster parents, parents, guardians, adoptive parents and other persons authorised or obliged to provide care and assistance to juvenile persons, to supervise and raise the juveniles, if finding out or suspecting that the juvenile is a victim of sexual, physical or other abuse, are obliged to inform an authorised person on prosecutor immediately. In this case, the sufficient prerequisite is suspicion that a juvenile is a victim of sexual, physical or another form of abuse in the digital environment.


Special provisions of procedural laws regulate also the issues of:

- cautious hearing of juvenile person as injured by criminal act,
- avoidance of multiple hearing of the injured juvenile party, primarily to prevent their secondary victimisation,
- protection of privacy of the juvenile as the injured party during the trial.

Removing the consequences of digital violence against children

Digital violence is a phenomenon that can influence people of any age or stage in life, including children and teenagers. As a consequence of abuse via ICT, all victims feel great anxiety and helplessness, grief and despair. The situation is additionally complicated by ignorance of reporting procedure, as well as of the support available. Many children do not report violence to adults, fearing punishment and lack of understanding. This is corroborated by surveys (Kuzmanović and Popadić, 2015) indicating who children report their experience to digital violence to: about 5 percent share it with a friend, 2 percent of children tell their parents about the violence, and only 1 percent of young people report to an adult from school (teacher, psychologist, pedagogue), while 2 percent try to talk to the violent person. Around 4 percent of children ignore the problem and do nothing about it, and 3 percent try to pay the aggressor back in kind.

When a process of violence takes place, it heavily affects the child's everyday life and constantly generates unease, pressure and concern. The abuse is present in the victim's life all the time, because all the disquieting contents are on the mobile phone, tablet or computer – quite near the child. The child cannot run away and find shelter from the aggressor or from the upsetting contents, and the



process of violence is followed by many people, which is an additional burden for the victim. In the past few years, we have all witnessed the internet violence resulting in tragic events like suicide and self-harm of children and youth, which flags the necessity of making procedures targeted at support provision to children and youth at risk.


Victims of violence should unequivocally know that assistance and support are at their disposal any time. They should be encouraged to talk to a person they trust, ideally an adult (parent, teacher, school psychologist/pedagogue). Victims of violence should be advised on how to keep digital evidence and deliver them to the competent authorities. Also, they need help in reporting violence to the administrators of social networks where violence has taken or is taking place.

In order to consolidate the child, it is necessary to provide it with emotional, social and psychological support. Thus implies listening without valuation and accusations, open communication leading to trust building, without the victim's fear of restrictive measures and punishment. The victim needs help in empowering his/her personality to take personal responsibility. Strengthening the social skills of a child suffering digital violence will take us to solution to the problems in social relations and it is very important to address this issue in a systematic way (Popadić, 2009). In parallel with provision of emotional, social and psychological support, the victim needs educational assistance too: technical support (preventive measures, but also reactions in cases of violence), information provision (referral to relevant institutions, resources, and other help services).

Any child victim of violence in digital environment is entitled to:

- Reasonable protection from the accused any time and any place,
- The right to fairness and respect of the victim's dignity and privacy,
- Reasonable, accurate and timely information of any public judicial proceeding conducted against the violator and abuser,
- The right to reasonable hearing in any public court proceeding,
- The right not to be exempt from public court proceeding, unless the court, having obtained clear and convincing evidence, establishes that the victim's testimony would be changed significantly should the victim hear other witnesses to the proceeding.

In order to have aboard professionals completely immersed in the subject matter, understanding the importance of the internet and digital technologies for every child and young person today, as well as the ways they spend time on them, it is necessary to select persons who are open to this subject, without prejudice, not inclined to problem downplaying and ready to steadily learn. Then, it is necessary to organise trainings, participation in conferences on this topic, networking and



connections with professionals worldwide in order to exchange experience and good practices. A form of mentoring and permanent support to professionals who are to deal with provision of support and assistance to children sexually abused on the internet, may influence the level of their individual self-confidence, and, consequently, on faster provision of adequate support to victims.


Communication is of key importance in efforts to hear and understand the victim, and to subsequently protect his/her rights. In order to make the communication among children, parents, representatives of institutions, professionals and volunteers working with or for children as effective as possible, we must use the terms and concepts that all actors understand and respect. Over the past decade, everyone working on prevention and elimination of violence, child exploitation and abuse, have encountered new terms such as grooming, sexting and live streaming of child sexual abuse. At the same time, terms like child prostitution and sexual abuse of juveniles for pornographic purposes are exposed to a growing criticism (sometimes from the victims themselves) and they are getting replaced with alternative terms, which are found to be less detrimental or less stigmatising for the child. In practice, there is a growing concern about fact that change in the existing terms (especially those established by law) and the emergence of new ones could cause confusion or lack of understanding, perhaps even hindering efficient prevention of child sexual exploitation.

Building trust rapport with abused children

Work with children expediently demands trust, particularly given that the trust of children injured by a criminal act has been damaged. Respecting the child's dignity and personality, trust building begins by explaining to the child the role of each team member working on support to children victims, as well as by answering the question of what exactly each professional does and all this in a vocabulary appropriate to the child's age and capacities.

Trust building is an ongoing process and takes time, constant presence in a constructive way, openness to communication and commitment to careful listening to the victim, even when the victim is closed for communication and refuses any exchange of information. Trust is based on respect and understanding, as well as on empathy and it takes a great investment of time, energy and devotion of every professional from the team providing support to the child.

One should bear in kind that all victims want to be recognised as victims, but they do not want pity. Every member of support and assistance team for abused child should let it know that he/she



is familiar with what happened (by no means say he/she know what exactly happened because they probably don't know everything) and that their role is to help the child tell the best and most truthful story of that.⁸ The beginning of talk with the child should be on "neutral" topics, in order to help the child relax as much as possible. Talks about interests, hobbies, friendship, are always good "ice breakers". Schoolchildren are often burdened with how well and how truthful their story will be, because the situation of this interview about the event mostly reminds them of examination at school. They should be told that it is important to tell the truth about what happened and if the truth is that they don't know and don't remember, that is all right.

It is necessary to have all team members working on capacity building for listening to the victim, listening that implies full focus on understanding everything that matters to the child victim. The better trained and more experienced the professional is, the more sincere the relationship with the child is, and children can easily feel sincerity and unqualified support leading to trust building.

Trust building in work with children refers also to building a positive attitude towards judicial proceeding and, in general, towards adults, because they conduct the procedure and make important decisions for the child. Trust is the starting point for psychologists' work with all categories, especially with children who are exposed to any type of abuse. Many discussions in literature about the treatment including persons who were abused for a long time and seriously, indicate the explicit need to build trust (Braun, 1986; Wilbur, 1984).

The psychological world of the abused child is complex in terms of symptoms, consequences and way of coping with the abuse trauma. Each of these segments (symptom, consequence, ways of coping) should be observed against the backdrop of the trauma type and seriousness, the child's age and specific psycho-physical status and the support it has. All these elements and their mutual influence need to be examined by experts, recognised and described especially in view of explaining the behaviours that hinder reporting and processing of criminal acts to the detriment of child, such as rebuttal, denial and silence.

⁸ Child-Friendly Guidelines for the Prevention of Violence against Children in the Digital Environment in BiH, (2017). Sarajevo: the International Forum of Solidarity – EMMAUS



Conclusion

Digital revolution taking place everywhere in the world at the same rate, rapidly and imminently changes the world. A headlong growth and spreading of information and communication technologies makes an unstoppable force pervading almost all spheres of contemporary life, from economy, society, education, culture, all the way to shaping daily life.⁹

The life and activities of children in contemporary age take place in the digital environment to a great extent, most often spending time on the internet. Studying, exploring, communication with family and friends, all take place through digital devices that constitute the focus of attention, desire and volition of every child today.

Anything arousing interest of children in exploring the infinite space of information and contents, and on that pathway of seeking, often faces them with problems. The most serious one is the flux of digital violence in which they plunge recklessly, quite easily, and the way out is very hard to find, most often by chance and after a long struggle with oneself, with one's environment and aggressor(s).

It is the task of all of us dealing with children to be the frontline defence from digital violence, as well as the strongest support to its victims once it happens. In order to be able to adequately respond to the challenges of this ever growing problem/phenomenon, it is necessary to constantly work on ourselves, but also to work together on defining processes and procedures aiming at fast and adequate support provision to victims, stopping the process of digital violence, reporting it to competent authorities and agencies as well as assisting the development of a proper legal and regulatory framework.

There are many attempts and initiatives to systematically approach this issue, but due to its specificity, constant changes and emergence of new forms of digital violence, new challenges that spread easily and quickly, especially among children, as well as the lack of experts in this field, all endeavours are still at an early stage. Information and education are the key activities globally undertaken, besides sporadic attempts to facilitate the reporting of violence by the victims, but there is an obvious absence of a systemic approach, defined procedures, especially in the segment of providing adequate support to children who have become victims of digital violence.

⁹ UNICEF Report on the State of the World's Children: Children in a Digital World, 2017



Recommendations


It is necessary to build capacities of professionals with various backgrounds working with child victims of violence on the internet, in order to provide them with adequate support and assistance in overcoming the trauma, prevention of re-victimisation by halting the violence process and faster re-socialisation. Defining specific training programmes, which are expected to enable professionals to constantly update their knowledge, motivating them to explore and permanently acquire new skills, is the key task.

It is necessary to carefully plan and conduct awareness-raising campaigns on risks and ensuring security on the internet. Campaigns need to focus on precisely defined segments of population/target groups: children at younger grades of primary school, high school children, parents teachers, representatives of police and prosecution offices, social workers, media. It is important to carefully devise tools that will make sure the message reaches the end users, and means of communication need to be innovative, versatile and appealing to each individual target group.

Training needs to be delivered to parents and teachers who spend most time with children and are the first to notice any change in the behaviour of child victims. The parents with sufficient knowledge of the subject matter can understand the problem more easily, judge the children less and initiate a two-way communication with greater chances to hear and understand them, which, ultimately, is the key to building a trust relationship.

Contents related to recognition and action in case of digital violence against children should be integrated with the regular school curricula, through class master periods or civic instruction. It is necessary to establish a two-way communication channel between teachers and children, not in order for adults to teach children how to avoid violence, but to ask them, hear and understand them, which is the basis of adequate assistance provision once a problem emerges. A systemic approach is necessary at the national level, but also impeccable functioning of all competent authorities and institutions at the local level.

It is also necessary to work on developing children's social skills, primarily empathy, tolerance and cooperation with friends. Students need training on stereotypes, prejudice and equality. From the aspect of discrimination, as a factor that influences violence among children, it is necessary to take stock of stereotype attitudes towards certain vulnerable groups.



Families and parents who need more than advice should be provided with programmes of practical, specific assistance. It is necessary to develop a complete set of services supporting families, such as helplines, psychologist support, referral to relevant sources of information, learning about how to act with a child victim of digital violence, information on various forms of institutional support.

An early warning system needs to be in place, to rely on a clearly defined set of indicators, similar to the human-trafficking warning system, and staff in various systems needs to be trained for using it in risk assessment. It is needed to assist various organisations and institutions dealing with the issues of preventing digital violence and supporting victims, to work together in a synchronised way and in full circle of support to children victims and to families.



APPENDIX I

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How is it possible to protect the identity of victim of digital violence and who deals with child victims of this type of violence in your country?

2. What are the techniques of support to child victims of violence used by your organisation or the institutions that you cooperate with?

3. How do you assist the victims of violence to get integrated with the society?

4. What are the procedures applied from the moment a victim reports violence till the moment of reintegration?





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