

How to talk about child sexual abuse in the digital world

A FrameWorks UK brief prepared for WeProtect Global Alliance

2021



1. SUMMARY

1.1 Key challenges



- · Child sexual abuse is seen as incomprehensible and inevitable
- Child sexual abuse online is often seen as only a criminal issue
- · Children's safety online is likely seen as issue for individual caregivers
- Technical understanding of the digital world is limited
- Descriptions of harm often stigmatise and shame survivors

1.2 Communicators should do more of



- Lead with shared values and use them to strengthen calls to action: social responsibility and ingenuity
- Balance urgency with efficacy
- · Collectivise and expand calls for prevention
- Explain the solutions to child sexual exploitation and abuse online
- Talk about the potential for and causes of harm

1.3 Communicators should do less of



- Avoid acronyms and minimise industry jargon
- Avoid direct mythbusting
- Don't rely on appeals to child rights alone
- Avoid crisis frames that tells us child sexual abuse is out of control
- Avoid facts and stats that focus solely on prevalence

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 About this brief

How we talk about child sexual exploitation and abuse online matters. Our communications can make the difference between salience and dismissal, between hope and fatalism, between collective action and stepping back.

Right now, the expansion of digital technologies and shifting legislative landscape are a significant challenge to those seeking to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation. These changes make it easier for people to claim that while effective online safeguarding is desirable, it's just not *possible*.

This strategic brief outlines challenges for communicating about child sexual exploitation and abuse online. And offers preliminary recommendations for communicators.

Direct evidence on what works to shift thinking on this issue is limited. And there is a significant need for new research to ensure that advocacy efforts are able to achieve the changes being sought. However, there *i*s a strong body of research on closely related issues in the UK and US. This brief chiefly draws on the following:

- Miller, T., L'Hôte, E., Aassar M. (2021). Communicating about Child Athlete Wellbeing: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations
- Fix, R., Busso, D., Mendelson, T., Letourneau, E. (2021) Changing the paradigm: Using strategic communications to promote recognition of child sexual abuse as a preventable public health problem
- Sweetland, J. (2021) Reframing Childhood Adversity: Promoting Upstream Approaches
- Busso, D., Miller, T., Lindland, E. (2020). Communicating about Child Sexual Abuse: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations
- FrameWorks Institute (2016). Communicating About Child Sexual Abuse: Strategic Memo for the NSPCC
- Fond, M., Haydon, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2015). Communicating Connections: Framing the Relationship Between Social Drivers, Early Adversity, and Child Neglect. A FrameWorks Message Brief
- Fond, M., Simon, A., Haydon, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2015). Attending to neglect: Using metaphors and explanatory chains to reframe child neglect in the United Kingdom.
- Volmert, A., Fond, M., & O'Neil, M. (2015). "It's hard to wrap your head around:" Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment and child sexual abuse in Alberta.
- Haydon, A., Lindland, E., & Volmert, A. (2014). Stuck in a Tale of Two Cities: Mapping the gaps on child development and well-being in Jacksonville
- Lindland, E., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2013). "No idea how that works or what you would do about it...": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment.
- Aubrun, A., Grady, J. (2003). Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The "Other-Mind" Mistake and the "Family Bubble"

Brief authored and compiled by Tamsyn Hyatt.

2.2 About WeProtect Global Alliance

WeProtect Global Alliance (the Alliance) brings together experts from civil society, Government and the private sector. The Alliance breaks down complex problems and develops policies and solutions to make the digital world safe and positive for children, preventing sexual abuse and long-term harm.

WeProtect Global Alliance's vision is a digital world designed to protect children from sexual abuse online.

The Alliance has members from different countries, sectors and backgrounds working together towards a common goal. Its collective reach can make a powerful difference - if paired with a collective voice.

To help reach this potential, the Alliance has partnered with FrameWorks UK to provide evidence-based insight on framing child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

A framing strategy is not the same as a messaging guide. It does not specify phases and soundbites - but provides ideas and sentiments that can be articulated and brought to life in different ways. It means Alliance members can align and amplify their collective messaging - whilst retaining individual identity, tone, and focus:



2.3 About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK collaborates with mission-driven organisations to communicate about social issues in ways that will create change.

FrameWorks UK is the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US. Together we deliver in-depth research to show how people understand social issues. And from these insights we develop and test strategic communications to help organisations create change. When we change the story, we can change the world.

We've worked with a range of organisations and individuals across Europe; from the NSPCC and International Planned Parenthood Federation, to campaigners with lived experience and high-profile public figures.

3. WHAT IS FRAMING AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR COMMUNICATORS?

When we want to change understanding of an issue we can apply some general guiding principles.

- Know what we are up against. Understand the challenges and opportunities presented by the deep-seated beliefs and assumptions people hold about an issue.
- Navigate these beliefs and assumptions by making framing choices: what's included and activated, what's not, what's explained and how.
- Trigger certain ideas. Bypass others. As soon as an idea or feeling is activated, it's strengthened and becomes harder to argue against or disprove. So communications that lead with, take on or 'bridge from' opposing views are likely to backfire.
- Show that change is possible, not just that problems are big and challenging. Huge problems can overwhelm they feel too big to solve and people will add them to the pile of things that they don't have the time, energy or emotional capacity to engage with.
- Equip and move your audience to think differently. Often communications that 'meet people where they are' just keep them where they are. To drive change we need to give people different ways to think.



4. WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR COMMUNICATORS -AND HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THEM?

In terms of underlying public attitudes and beliefs on child sexual exploitation and abuse online, our evidence suggests there are five main - and interlinked - challenges to navigate:

4.1 Child sexual abuse is seen as incomprehensible and inevitable

People tend to believe that offenders are 'evil,'monstrous' and twisted beyond human understanding. They are 'wicked people', often adults in positions of trust, who are driven by immoral and uncontrollable urges.

This leads to fatalistic thinking: irredeemably evil people will always commit evil acts - and little can be done to change this.

Participant, Canada:

I get an immediate turning of my stomach. It's a horrible thing.¹

Participant, UK:

That's the stuff that you hear about all the time, and it's a terrible thing. It should never happen. I think those are just wicked people. I won't go into what I feel should be done to these people, but you don't do that, especially to an innocent child.²

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to communicate about child sexual exploitation and abuse online

First, it can make conversations deeply uncomfortable and hard to engage in. Disgust and revulsion make it harder for people to think productively about the information they receive - and easier to switch off.

Second, it blocks people's ability to understand *how* and *why* child sexual abuse online takes place. And so what can be done to prevent it.

This is a particular challenge when talking about where abuse can take place (4.4). And our need to go beyond contact abuse in isolated, private homes and include spaces where grooming, livestreaming, and capping (recording a livestream) are possible.

 ¹ Volmert, A., Fond, M., & O'Neil, M. (2015). "It's hard to wrap your head around:" Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment and child sexual abuse in Alberta.
² Lindland, E., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2013). "No idea how that works or what you would do about it...": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment.

How to address this challenge

Avoid a focus on horrific stories about specific cases of abuse or visceral images and statistics that solely focus on the scale and extent of harm.

Lead with an affirmative values statement (5.1) about what we all want for children and our digital world.

Talk about child sexual exploitation and abuse online as preventable (5.3). Activate this idea early and often.

Avoid deterministic language about prevalence. Signal that prevention is in progress with terms like 'currently' 'now' and 'today.'

Where possible, **explain why** child sexual abuse online happens (5.5) - and the risk and protective factors in a child's environment that make abuse more or less likely (4.4, 5.4, 5.5).

4.2 Child sexual exploitation and abuse online is often seen as only a criminal issue

Child sexual exploitation and abuse is seen as above all an issue for the criminal justice system.

This leads people to reason in limited ways. To believe society's only viable response is to arrest, prosecute and punish offenders after a crime is committed.

And combines with 4.1: the belief that offenders are irredeemable and so, left unchecked, will go on to reoffend. When active, people reason that life imprisonment is the only way to guarantee child safety.

Participant, UK:

A person could have molested a child and they could be put away for five years, got on parole and then got released, and they could do it again. I think once you do something like that, you should just be locked away and then not let out.³

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to communicate about child sexual abuse online

First, it backgrounds thinking about prevention (5.3). Focusing on retribution for past harm often makes it harder to think about the factors that prevent future harm (4.4, 5.4).

Second, it obscures the role of organisations outside the criminal justice system. When active, it's harder for people to see the need for these organisations to act. And for the cross-sector collaboration necessary for effective identification, prevention and response to child sexual abuse online.

³Lindland, E., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2013). "No idea how that works or what you would do about it...": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment.

How to address this challenge

Avoid punitive language and references to the criminal justice system as the sole, first or most effective response.

Talk about prevention - and specifically, how we can change digital spaces to disrupt or prevent abuse (5.3). Explicitly and often.

Talk about the range of actors that can help prevent child sexual abuse online and the roles only they can play. Name schools, the media, private companies, Government bodies and civil society organisations for example.

4.3 Children's safety online is likely seen as issue for individual caregivers

Child wellbeing is often seen to take place within an exclusive family bubble. Seen in this way caregivers are ultimately responsible for shaping children's experiences.

Participant, USA:

Because the kid didn't ask to be born. The parents put them in this, and they need to take care of them.

Participant, USA:

It's up to the parents to train that child up to do the right thing.4

This leads people to see child safety as predominantly an issue for parents. It obscures different social conditions parents face (5.5) and the range of places where child sexual abuse can happen (4.1, 4.4).

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to communicate about child sexual abuse online

First, it limits the role of non-parents. If a child's risk of abuse is determined by what happens at home, then efforts based outside the home will fail. Effective prevention (5.3) becomes solely a matter of educating and preparing parents, not systemic measures or policies.

Second, it obscures our broader societal responsibility for keeping children safe - and helping them thrive (5.1).

⁴Haydon, A., Lindland, E., & Volmert, A. (2014). Stuck in a Tale of Two Cities: Mapping the gaps on child development and well-being in Jacksonville

How to address this challenge

Avoid a narrow focus on the dynamics of individual households and struggles (4.4).

Talk about non-parent actors and organisations, about policies and programmes, and the vital role they play. Explicitly and often.

Explain the shared contexts that shape lives and decision-making (5.4, 5.5).

Give concrete examples of solutions that don't just apply to parents and caregivers. And **explain** how they would make a difference (5.4).

4.4 Technical understanding of the digital world is limited

Most people's understanding of our digital world - from the internet, to digital devices - is limited.

This limits people's ability to understand how child sexual abuse online can take place, and our collective role in preventing it.

This also combines with the belief that modern life is inherently dangerous and unsafe. When active, people reason that it's not safe for children anywhere (6.4). That 'kids these days' are addicted to - and victims of - dangerous new technology. And that little can be done to change this.

More research is needed to understand how this belief influences peoples' thinking on digital more broadly. How far this differs for digital natives: people who grew up with digital and are more familiar with it; and how far recent emphasis on design simplicity encourages users to think less critically about technology.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to communicate about child sexual abuse online

The idea that digital is distinctly different or separate from real life creates psychological distance. Online interactions can often feel abstract and 'less real.' This is a particular challenge when talking about the harms of behaviours like grooming and capping.

It also makes it harder to draw parallels with people's own lives and behaviours. For example: a parent may intrinsically understand that they themselves 'filter' experiences for their children (4.3), but not that web content also needs filtering.

How to address this challenge

Talk about how we must make a safe digital world - and thriving children - a priority. Share the ways in which digital can help children thrive.

Broaden thinking by being explicit about the range of digital devices that can be used to facilitate child sexual abuse online. Name phones, gaming consoles, home hubs and other internet-enabled devices - alongside computers.

Use case studies carefully (see 4.1 and 4.3) to make concrete connections with people's lives and everyday experience.

Avoid activating the idea that digital technology is inherently more difficult (6.1) or dangerous (6.4) than other parts of our lives.

Avoid appeals to nostalgia that block support for forward-thinking policy.

Explain digital risks and protective factors (5.4, 5.5) using straightforward, accessible language (6.1).

4.5 Descriptions of harm often stigmatise and shame survivors

People believe that child sexual abuse causes irreparable harm. The effects of sexual abuse are seen as deeper and more enduring than other forms of abuse.

This leads people to reason in narrow, highly stigmatising ways. To believe that survivors are fundamentally 'other,' damaged and different.

Participant, UK:

It would take their life away straight away... that's going to affect their life potentially forever.

Participant, UK:

It has the ability to really crush a kid. The moment a child learns that they've been sexually abused, they don't even know about... They won't know what impact or effect it has, and for the moment they kind of learn that this was wrong, something wasn't right.⁵

This combines with how people think about the agency of older children. Across our work on child maltreatment, older children are seen as responsible for their own experiences and outcomes. This can lead people to blame children for the harm they experience. Especially when child sexual abuse materials are self-generated.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to communicate about child sexual abuse online

First, it blocks productive thinking about the need for survivor support and services. If children are 'forever damaged,' it's hard to see how survivors can overcome trauma.

Second, it encourages people to see child sexual abuse online as something that happens to others. Terms like 'victims' and 'vulnerable' add to psychological distance (4.4). People become unable or unwilling to see themselves and their families as at risk. Less likely to support collective solutions. And more likely to blame 'those children.'

Stories about vulnerable children experiencing unthinkable harm activate and strengthen both of these ideas.

⁵Lindland, E., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2013). "No idea how that works or what you would do about it...": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment.

How to address this challenge

Avoid a narrow focus on the damaging effects of child sexual abuse and graphic descriptions of harm (see also: 4.1).

Avoid talking about victims and vulnerability. Instead, **talk** about the higher risks children face online (5.5) or in having their abuse identified by services. And how these can be addressed (5.4).

Sequence talking about inequality carefully. Talk about our collective duty to keep *all* children safe (5.1) or the things we all want from our digital world, before talking about specific inequalities and needs.

Avoid talking about children's 'choices' 'behaviours' and 'lifestyles.' This narrows people's focus - and risks placing responsibility on children to protect themselves from abuse.

Don't overstate the causal link between early adversity and later life outcomes. **Tell** a developmental story instead. Where survivors - given the right support at the right time - can go on to thrive.

5.1 Lead with shared values - and use them to strengthen calls to action

Facts alone aren't motivating. To motivate, reasoning must be linked to our identity and values. When facts conflict with our existing beliefs, people are more likely to reject them. And to disengage.

Leading with shared values helps people connect information about child sexual abuse online to their own identity and values. This means that they're more able to think productively about the information they receive (4.1) - and less likely to see that information as in conflict with existing beliefs.

More research is needed to know definitively *which* values will shift thinking on child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Across our work on child maltreatment, two values have emerged as productive and these may have potential to shift thinking here: **social responsibility** and **ingenuity.** This is how these values can be used in practice:

Before	Child sexual exploitation and abuse online is a real and growing threat. We must act now before more children are put at risk.
After	Social responsibility Our society has a responsibility to keep children safe and thriving worldwide. We must act now before we fail in this duty and more children are put at risk.
After	Ingenuity Child sexual abuse online is a real and growing challenge - and one our community can meet. Together, we have the skills and resources to innovate and keep all children safe.

Use values with words like 'we,' 'us' and 'our' to help establish collective thinking. And show that all of us have a stake in ending child sexual abuse online.

5.2 Balance urgency with efficacy

Determinism and fatalism (4.1,6.4) can only be overcome if we pair problems with our ability to fix them. This means showing that things can change. Intentionally and deliberately. And that we have confidence in our ability to make change happen.

Before	The challenge is urgent and intensified by the pandemic. We must do more.
After	This challenge is urgent and intensified by the pandemic. We can and must do more.
Before	Can legislation keep up with technology progress, and if so, how?
After	Legislation can keep up with technology progress. Let's talk about how.

Draw parallels between the solutions you're calling for and past successes. Like car safety features - a product of cross-sector collaboration, regulation and expertise. Or accessibility by design members of the tech community innovating to prioritise and overcome shared challenges.

5.3 Collectivise and expand calls for prevention

Calls for prevention often don't do the work we need them to. In short: if people don't understand *why* (4.1) or *how* (4.4) something happens, they struggle to see how it can be made to work differently.

When we *do* connect to effective prevention - efforts tends to be limited. It's wise choices made by individuals. It's the disciplined runner preventing cardiovascular disease. It's the concerned parent preemptively blocking a social media platform (4.3).

These kinds of connections allow people to blame individuals - and survivors - for not making better choices (4.5). Rather than seeing the need for true prevention: namely, the changes to policy and practice that make it harder to commit child sexual abuse online.

We can strengthen calls for prevention in three ways:

- 1. Make prevention society's shared responsibility (5.1). Talk about collective, as well as individual, action.
- 2. Expand calls for prevention with specific examples and a clear explanation of how it works (5.4).
- 3. Talk about the difference made to children now *and* in future. Signal that prevention is in progress with words like 'now,' 'right now,' and 'today.'

Before	Governments must act to prevent child sexual abuse online.
After	We can all work to prevent child sexual abuse online - right now, and in future. Here's how

5.4 Explain the solutions to child sexual abuse online

Explanation is powerful. It invites people to understand how something works. And more importantly, how it can be made to work differently.

A comprehensive list of programmes or policy solutions does little to help people see how these solutions could make a difference. It's better to offer a single solution - and explain it well - than a list of what could work.

Show how we can redesign our digital spaces and technologies to keep children safe and thriving. Explain that these things *have been designed* and so can be *changed by design*.

This brings in much-needed agency and possibility; overcoming fatalism (4.1, 6.4) and building support for change. It also activates related ideas of intentionality and common sense: that our digital world *can and should* be able to meet our needs.

Before	Our digital world is not safe for children. All too often, offenders are free to find and exploit new victims. We need to act now before even more children are harmed.
After	Our digital world is not designed with child safety in mind. We can work together to redesign our digital products and services to keep each and every child safe.

5.5 Talk about the potential for - and causes of - harm

People's inability to understand why and how child sexual abuse happens are two of the biggest challenges for communicators.

Without this understanding, people default to the idea that 'it's just the way things are' (4.1). Or that problems are too big and complex to be tackled (4.4). We become vulnerable to misinformation - like 'it's too hard to remove child sexual abuse material as it's all on the dark web' - to help fill in the blanks.

Explanatory chains make explicit the relationship between a problems' cause and its consequences. And - by including mediating factors - close gaps in people's thinking.

For example, this chain explains the potential societal causes of child abuse:

"The conditions our society is experiencing [Cause] increase the risk of child abuse. Severe and persistent stress wear down our ability to manage emotions [Mediating factor]. This helps to explain why financial burdens across society have contributed to a rise in child abuse in the past [Consequence]."

We can also use explanatory chains to set up solutions (5.4). For example:

"...but we know that removing stressors from families and adding supports makes a huge difference quickly [Mediating factor]. Providing financial assistance and stepping up social services [Mediating factor]] will mean fewer people are affected by stress and violence [Consequence]."

Use explanatory chains to talk about the risk factors of child sexual abuse online - and show that they are both avoidable and understood (5.2).

Make sure not to depict technology itself as the problem (4.4). Instead, work backwards from calls to action. For example: if we're calling for tighter regulation of online spaces, identify a lack of regulation as the causal factor.

6.1 Avoid acronyms and minimise industry jargon

Complex acronyms and industry jargon are further barriers to engagement and understanding - they can also dehumanise the children at the heart of this issue. Most people are unable or unwilling to fully engage with child sexual abuse online (4.1,4.4). And complex, insider prose signals that this is an issue for other people - with other expertise - to solve.

This does not mean communicators should 'dumb down' or self-censor. It means balancing expertise with accessibility. And recognising that we can bring more people with us - and the changes we need to make - with clear, inclusive content.

Before	We need to tackle the prevalence of CSAM online.
After	We need to tackle the prevalence of child sexual abuse material online.

6.2 Avoid direct mythbusting

Myth-busting rarely works to correct misconceptions. In many cases it backfires, and people dig deeper into their existing views. When we remind people of the myths around child sexual abuse online - even to rebut or counter - we still activate and strengthen them.

It's better to start with an affirmative case - the story that we want people to hear - and tell it strongly and consistently in our communications.

This means not getting drawn into false binaries - like privacy versus protection, or prevention versus punishment.

Before	'This isn't about undermining people's privacy, or doing parent's jobs for them,' says Chief Technology Officer
After	'This is about making sure that each and every child is safe online,' says Chief Technology Officer

6.3 Don't rely on appeals to child rights alone

Appeals to child rights alone can backfire. In short: people support what rights are *for* (like keeping children safe), but often struggle to connect this to the language and legislation of rights.

What people *do* connect to rights is often unproductive. Like the belief that rights are privileges to earn, or that 'entitled children' have too many rights.

Participant, USA:

...if that child decides to go the other way, their rights are going to be taken. So they don't have the right anymore. Their rights are going to be taken away from them.⁶

It's better to talk about the specific needs of children - to be safe and well - and why this matters.

Before	Children's rights should be placed at the heart of decision-making.
After	Children's safety and wellbeing should be placed at the heart of decision-making.

⁶Haydon, A., Lindland, E., & Volmert, A. (2014). Stuck in a Tale of Two Cities: Mapping the gaps on child development and well-being in Jacksonville

6.4 Avoid crisis frames that tell us child sexual abuse is out of control

Crisis framing rarely does the work we need it to. It activates disbelief (this can't be true) or fatalism (this can't be solved).

This doesn't mean denying or ignoring problems. It does mean that, when we call attention to the scale of a problem, we need to say (5.2) and show (5.4) that it can be fixed.

Before	The scale of this problem is increasing at an alarming rate. The tsunami of cases is increasing the burden on governments, civil society and the technology industry.
After	The scale of this problem is increasing - but so is our ability to tackle it. We can and must urgently scale our response by

6.5 Avoid facts and stats that focus solely on prevalence

Facts and stats alone are often interpreted in line with people's existing beliefs. This is motivated reasoning - an immune system for our worldview that kicks in when we encounter threatening information.

People reason about child sexual abuse in fatalistic (4.1,4.5) and narrow ways (4.2, 4.3, 4.4). Without narrative cues, facts and stats on prevalence are likely to confirm these beliefs.

It's better to deploy facts and stats to support our overall narrative on child sexual abuse online - and not as the narrative itself.

Before	Approximately 50% of respondents say they would like to stop searching for and viewing CSAM.
After	We have a duty to keep children safe and prevent child sexual abuse online. This means reducing child sexual abuse materials - with programs like ReDirection, an anonymous self-help program for early offenders. We know that around half of early offenders would like to stop searching for and viewing

Below is a non-exhaustive list of areas where more research is needed:

- What are the most effective values and issue frames; specifically, what is the effectiveness of 'protection' and 'prevention' as frames?
- How is harm caused by online abuse understood? Is it seen as less harmful (versus contact abuse) or more harmful (as material can be shared multiple times)?
- What are the generational differences in relationships to and understanding of technology and how might these be bridged?
- · How can we talk about criminal justice and prevention?
- · Which are the most effective prevention strategies to talk about to counter fatalism?
- How can we ensure our language in no way blames victims of child sexual abuse online, including when material is self generated?
- What are the most effective ways to talk about child sexual abuse material that is generated and/or shared by adolescents?

