

# P R O M I S E

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## **Barnahus & online sexual violence**

**Survey results 2020**



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## Child Sexual Abuse Online – Barnahus Practice

Barnahus is an evolving model that can be adapted to different legal, socio-economic and cultural contexts. Promise overall goal is that all Barnahus and similar services progressively develop excellence in practice according to international law and to the Barnahus Quality Standards:

All Barnahus implement multi-disciplinary and interagency interventions<sup>1</sup> organized under one roof in a child-friendly setting<sup>2</sup>, placing the best interests of the child<sup>3</sup> at the centre.

This paper looks at current practice in Barnahus concerning child victims of online child sexual violence. The practice described in this paper was gathered through a simple questionnaire completed by Barnahus in Croatia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK in June 2020. As noted above, practice in Barnahus is constantly evolving and adapted to new challenges and circumstances. Changes in practice may therefore have happened since the answers were collected.

The questionnaire was circulated by the Promise Barnahus Network at the request of the Council of Europe in the context of the [End online child sexual abuse @ Europe](#) funded by the Fund to End Violence Against Children.

The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. Do you have statistics, or can you estimate the proportion of cases dealt in Barnahus that a) are related to only online child sexual abuse/other forms of online violence and, b) have some form of online elements (videos, self-produced images, texts, etc.)?
2. What are the most frequent examples of child abuse cases that have on-line elements dealt with by Barnahus?
3. Based on your experience, is the trend of online abuse rising – have you recorded or dealt with more cases of online child sexual abuse due to the covid-19 restriction measures and/or during recent years?
4. Has the Barnahus identified specific needs for child victims of online crimes and additional support services they would require in addition to those offered for victims of “offline” abuse?
5. Does the Barnahus approach or protocols differ for victims of online crimes and if yes, how?
6. Has the Barnahus identified good practice models in online child sexual abuse cases?

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<sup>1</sup> Barnahus Quality Standard 5

<sup>2</sup> Barnahus Quality Standard 4

<sup>3</sup> UNCRC art 3, Barnahus Quality Standard 1.1.

## Statistics and forms of violence

A key conclusion from the survey was that while there is progress in collecting specific data on online abuse, there is room for much improvement in terms of both recording and providing easy access to specific data on online elements and types of abuse. For example, many Barnahus responded that they see an increased need to document the online elements to cases separately. Some are already in the process of changing systems for data collection to do so.

Improved data collection also concerns ensuring that staff become better at identifying online elements and that for example questions about online elements of abuse become standard in forensic interviews and child protection assessments.

Based on the data that exists, most Barnahus responded that they have seen an increase in online cases and cases with online elements in recent years. Cases mostly seen in Barnahus that replied to the survey involved grooming, children depicted in sexual abuse material, including voluntary or forced sexual posing and distribution of nude pictures/films and pictures/films of children involved in sexual acts. Extortion and blackmail through different means are common. A few cases of children subjected to live streamed sexual abuse on demand were reported.

*The Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Center, Croatia* stated that while they do not have current statistics available on online violence, including sexual violence, they note that the proportion of online cases is rising. Examples of child abuse cases that have online elements mainly concern grooming and sextortion cases. They also see a rise in cases of sexting, which in some circumstances may pose a risk to children.

*Finland* stated that while the number of online child sexual abuse cases are growing, these cases are rarely seen in Barnahus. The Helsinki and Oulu units have seen one case which only involved virtual contacts. Cases which include pictures or texts as part of the abuse are a bit more common. There have been a few cases where child sexual abuse images have been distributed globally and are still circulating on the internet.

*In Iceland*, the Barnahus stated that they see an increase in many forms of online sexual abuse, and that the trend appeared exacerbated during the Covid-19 crisis:

- Children who send pictures of themselves of sexual nature: 1 Jan-31 Dec 2019, 12 children; 1 Jan – 31 May 2020, 6 children
- Children forced to take pictures or send pictures of sexual nature: 1 Jan-31 Dec 2019, 3 children; 1 Jan – 31 May 2020, 3 children
- Sexual photographs or videos shown to the child or taken of the child: 1 Jan-31 Dec 2019, 19 children; 1 Jan – 31 May 2020, 11 children
- Sexual abuse through the internet: 1 Jan-31 Dec 2019 – 16 children; 1 Jan – 31 May 2020, 15 children
- The child gets to know the perpetrator through the web and communicates with the perpetrator: 1 Jan-31 Dec 2019, 17 children; 1 Jan – 31 May 2020, 13 children
- The child receives a text message or receives sexual calls: 1 Jan-31 Dec 2019, 7 children; 1 Jan – 31 May 2020, 6 children

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Up to June 2020, 15% of referrals to *Barnahus in Galway, Ireland* had an online element (31 out of 205 cases recorded in 2020). There are no records of cases that are online only. The most frequent forms of online child sexual abuse include:

Naked pictures sent and received via social media;

- Older males posing as younger males and seeking out masturbation videos and naked pictures of young girls via Snapchat;
- Blackmail of children by older peers/adult requesting masturbation videos, posed explicit pictures - once a video/picture is received, the child is threatened with said picture/video being released into public arena if more are not sent and;
- Sexual acts performed on peers/adults by children being recorded on mobile phones and distributed widely on social media.

The number of cases from *Barnehus Norway* only include reported to, or revealed by, the police. *Barnahus* experience is that few children tell their parents about online sexual abuse, and that there still are large numbers of unreported cases.

The table below provide an overview of online sexual abuse in general for a selection of different *Barnehus* in *Norway* (dates for 2020 refer to the first six months of 2020). The main tendency is toward an increase in online sexual abuse cases during 2020, reported by almost all *Barnehus* in *Norway*. It is too early to know for sure if the pandemic covid-19 has led to more online sexual abuse cases.

BARNEHUS	2019	2020
Stavanger	5%	8%
Moss	3.5%	8%
Trondheim	11%	4.6%
Oslo	8%	10%
Bodø	3.4%	5.8%
Bergen	15.8%	4.7%
Tromsø	6.3%	8.4%

The *Barnahus* in *Norway* see different categories of violence:

- *Category 1*: Children depicted in sexual abuse material online
- *Category 2*: Children tricked into sexual contact over the internet, including sextortion
- *Category 3*: Children subjected to live streamed sexual abuse on demand (few cases)
- *Category 4*: Children photographed/filmed by their peers in a sexualised situation
- *Category 5*: Children voluntarily producing sexualised images or videos of themselves
- *Category 6*: Children where their parent are arrested for downloading sexual images of children

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The categories are not quantified in a detailed manner on national level, but there are plans to achieve this 2021.

*Barnahus Linköping in Sweden* noted that the cases they see in Barnahus concern children who have been exploited for sexual posing.

*The Lighthouse in London* stated that the online cases they see concern:

- Online grooming e.g., via Snapchat
- Peer on peer CSEM
- Receiving explicit images
- Disseminating explicit images received to peers, sometimes out of revenge
- Being told to send explicit images of self

## Barnahus practice in online child sexual abuse cases

The Barnahus that responded to the questionnaire made a few observations in terms of specific impact and needs in relation to online sexual violence, and how that affected the services provided to the children.

In principle, all participating Barnahus offer the same type of procedure and services to all children who are referred to Barnahus. A child who is suspected to have been exposed to online crimes who is referred to Barnahus will mostly take the same path through the Barnahus as other victims and receive similar treatment, adapted to the child's specific needs and circumstances. However, the Barnahus who responded to the questionnaire noted a few differences to other cases.

In *Sweden*, there is a specific group in the police that handles these cases, which are not integrated in the Barnahus. This means that many cases are not seen in Barnahus, and when cases are referred to Barnahus, the interagency planning meetings mostly do not take place. Children who are referred to Barnahus for a forensic interview receive the same services as other children, including for example crisis support.

*“What do I need from adults? To realize that everyone can make a stupid mistake, but it doesn't have to mark me for a lifetime and I do not need to suffer or to be humiliated forever. I need someone to convince me that I can go further and have a normal life, and not be a 'girl who sends her tits' and nothing more than that”.*

*Ireland* noted that the investigation of online child sexual abuse tends to take much longer than other types of cases as the person subject to abuse allegations is more likely to live in a different jurisdiction to the child. In addition, the Gardai may be required to involve a specialist unit that deals with online behaviour and this can cause delays. From a child protection perspective, cases may be closed sooner because the family have acted protectively in relation to the child. The forensic medical service is often not involved in cases of online child sexual abuse, however if the young person experiences online sexual abuse as an element of a wider experience of abuse, forensic medical examination may still be offered. The purpose of the medical

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examination may not be to gather forensic evidence but to test for sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy or indications of trauma.

*Croatia* noted that the approach and protocols used in online child sexual abuse cases are similar to those used for other types of child abuse.

*Norway* noted that due to the fact that offenders use Internet there are often many victims in each case. The victims in one case often live in different regions throughout the country. The 11 different Barnehus in Norway therefore often work on the same criminal case, with different victims, but with the same offender. This calls for inter-agency and multidisciplinary collaboration not only within a Barnahus, but between Barnahus. It is important to facilitate and ensure optimal child protection, enhancing the quality of investigation, prosecution, and treatment service in each case. To target this goal the Barnehus in Norway established a national network where all Barnehus are represented in 2017. This network focuses on online child sexual exploitation and abuse to learn more about this form of abuse/exploitation and to secure the quality of work in these cases.

In *Norway*, each Barnehus normally follow the ordinary protocols in cases of online sexual abuse, but another procedure was tested in a national case with over hundred victims. Because the offender confessed early in the investigation, and the police got hold of all the evidence, it was possible for the attorney general to decide that the victims did not have to undergo a forensic interview at Barnehus. Instead of interviews, all the victims got an appointment with their lawyer and a clinical adviser from Barnehus. This was to secure the information flow to the victims, about the process, and to consider the need for further treatment. The investigation team, police attorney, lawyers and Barnehus had an overall good experience with this model.

A few respondents also noted that the process of disclosure often is very different to other cases. Often online abuse is discovered in the context of an investigation only as the child comes for their interview. Sometimes cases of online abuse or elements of online abuse are revealed only because the police have found evidence of abuse in the context of another investigation.

The respondents observed that children sometimes do not identify the online elements as a criminal activity or they do not disclose because of strong feelings of guilt and shame or a belief that the abuse won't be seen as a problem since "nothing happened in real life" and that the perpetrator in any case can't be tracked down. There is also often a fear from young people that they will be banned from accessing the internet. This may affect their willingness to disclose online abuse.

*"My schoolteacher told me she could not do anything since it is happening online. I was left alone".*

Research and experience in Barnahus show that the impact of online abuse on the child can be as severe, and in some cases more severe than offline abuse, especially in situations in which perpetrators cannot be identified or where sexual images have been shared on social media.

*Croatia* referred to research which suggests that texting with strangers online, receiving sexual content on social networks, as well as receiving pictures and videos of themselves, alongside attempts to stop sexting, or requesting the sender to stop sending sexual content, often is associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression in young people. Receiving sexually provocative messages, photos in general, but also photos of themselves and/or their partner, sending photos of themselves and forwarding photos of their partner (with or without consent) was found to be associated with suicidal thoughts. The greatest association with suicidal

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thoughts was found in young people who sext under persuasion and coercion, as well as in those who sext with a significantly older person.

Most of the Barnahus concluded that victims of online sexual abuse often require adaptations to crisis support and therapy. The responding Barnahus see increased feelings of guilt and shame in cases with online elements, coupled with a strong sense of loneliness and isolation. One Barnahus responded that victims often feel that they have voluntarily “consented” to online sexual activities, which not only can lead to increased feelings of guilt and shame, but can contribute to resistance to treatment.

In online cases, some of the Barnahus conclude from their experience that the trauma in children often is amplified by feelings of uncertainty and helplessness because the text and/or images of the abuse are being circulated online. Children and young people who become aware of the impact of online abuse often experience extreme distress. The thought of, or the actual, continued detection and access to their material on the internet can constitute a serious and repeated trauma-trigger that can be hard to treat. This often demands other interventions than the regular therapy that the Barnahus offers as the child must learn to cope with the fact that they cannot control what happens to their material as it continues to circulate on the internet.

Ireland noted that victims of online abuse may have specific emotional or developmental difficulties that make them more vulnerable to being targeted using this medium. For example, children and young people who have difficulties with social interaction (e.g., social anxiety, Autistic Spectrum Disorder) may be more likely to use the internet to communicate and form relationships with others. Moreover, some of the most vulnerable youths may be alienated from their parents, victims of familial abuse, or dealing with sensitive issues such as inner conflicts about sexual orientation that they feel their parents will not understand.

*“They told me just to switch off my phone. They forwarded each other my photos, even had them printed and put out in my school before teachers had them removed. When I switch off my phone, it does not help. Thoughts in my head are still here”.*

*“When I told my mother, she freaked out and yelled how could I have been so stupid to send him those photographs, that this is not the way she raised me...”*





## Implementing the Barnahus Quality Standards throughout Europe

PROMISE is supporting Europe to adopt the Barnahus model as a standard practice for providing child victims and witnesses of violence rapid access to justice and care. We undertake this work to fulfil the PROMISE vision: a Europe where all children enjoy their right to be protected from violence.

A Barnahus provides multi-disciplinary and interagency collaboration to ensure that child victims and witnesses of violence benefit from a child-friendly, professional and effective response in a safe environment which prevents (re)traumatisation. With the formal support from national authorities, PROMISE provides opportunities to translate national commitment into action and engage internationally in the process. In addition, regular networking and strategic communications continually activate our growing network of professionals and stakeholders who are committed to introducing and expanding Barnahus services nationally.

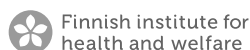
The first PROMISE project (2015-2017) set European standards and engaged a broad network of professionals. The second PROMISE project (2017-2019) promoted national level progress towards meeting the standards and formalised the PROMISE Barnahus Network. The current project (2020-2022) is expand these activities to include University training, case management tools, with a view to establishing a European Competence Centre for Barnahus and laying the groundwork for an accreditation system for Barnahus.

PROMISE is managed by the Children at Risk Unit at the Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat.

Access the PROMISE tools and learn more at [www.barnahus.eu](http://www.barnahus.eu)



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