



Project Report: Child-to-Child Abuse Talk Online

December 2023



C2CHAT

CHILD TO CHILD ABUSE TALK

Web: <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/project-dragon-s/c2chat>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The report shares some of the key findings from a research project - C2CHAT - conducted at Swansea University, in collaboration with Tarian ROCU, Welsh Government and Youth Cymru. The project has been financed by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

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C2CHAT
CHILD TO CHILD ABUSE TALK

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1. What is the C2CHAT Project, and why is it important?

Headquartered at [Swansea University](#),ⁱ **C**hild **T**o **C**hild **A**buse **T**alk (C2CHAT) is a research project that addresses the escalating problem of technology-assisted sexual harassment between children. This is an important issue to work collaboratively on. In 2020 [@everyonesinvited](#) started to publish and collate survivors' stories of sexual harassment in schools and universities. This led to inspections of schools in [England](#) and [Wales](#), Government responses and Parliamentary inquiries. In Wales, in 2022 the Welsh Government announced the development of an Action Plan, which at the time of writing is under development.

In a digital context, sexual harassment can only happen through language (e.g., words, emojis, emoticons) and other forms of communication (e.g., images, videos, memes). Such language is not 'only words' - it is action: it is communicative behaviour that causes physical and emotional harm. This is why we call this project C2CHAT, which we define as:

Sexually abusive communicative behaviour that is carried out by children when interacting with each other across all technology-assisted platforms.

1.1. Aim and research questions

C2CHAT's aim is to create a blueprint (see [project website](#)) that maps out what we know about C2CHAT and how to help children and the adults who support them (child safeguarding practitioners, parents and carers) to prevent it.

Our project thus answers the questions:

1. What do we know about C2CHAT?
2. How do children 'do' C2CHAT?
3. What do children and the adults who support them need to help prevent C2CHAT?

1.2. What is our research approach and how did we implement it?

Our research questions require the use – and integration – of different methodological approaches.ⁱⁱ These are outlined in Figure 1, alongside our project timeline.



Figure 1: Research approach and timeline

2. What do we know about C2CHAT? – A systematic review of the academic and practitioner literature

2.1. What did we do?

To answer Research Question 1, we examined the knowledge base on online, child-on-child sexually harmful behaviour, with a focus on language and communication. Systematic reviews of the academic and practitioner-based literature were conducted, adhering to PRISMA guidelinesⁱⁱⁱ and addressing the following questions:

- ① What is the current knowledge base, academic and practitioner, on online, child-on-child sexual harmful behaviour?
- ② Where are the gaps in the academic literature?
- ③ What are the gaps in the practitioner literature?

2.1.1. Systematic review of the academic literature

Three bibliographic databases (Scopus, iFind and Google Scholar) were utilised to identify existing literature on child-on-child online sexually harmful behaviour. Screening was done in January 2023 and the screened timeframe for included literature was from 1st of January 2018 to 31st of December 2022. Key terms included the search phrases in Figure 2.

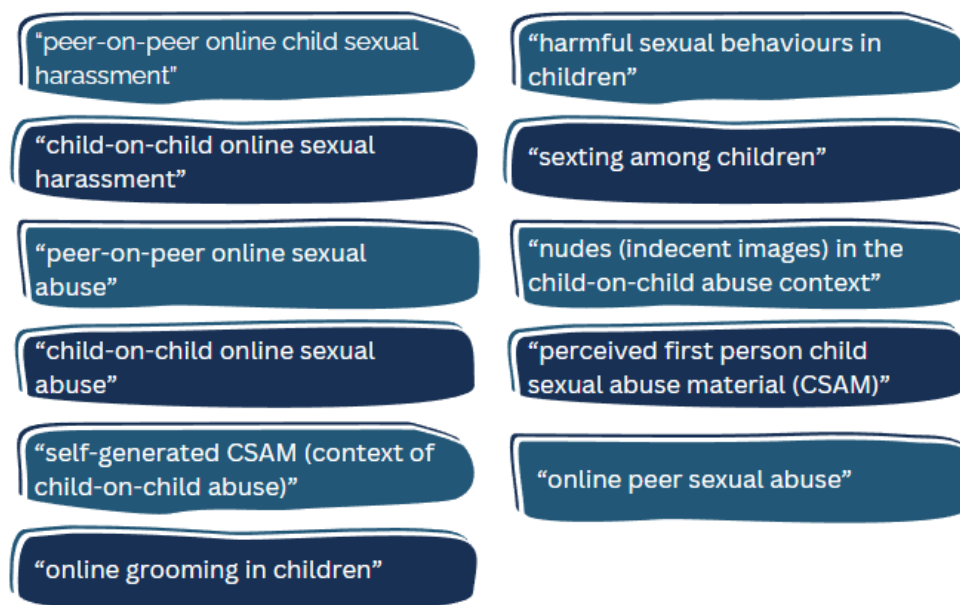


Figure 2: Literature review search terms

For the sexting key phrase Boolean search operators were applied, as outlined in Figure 3. Articles needed to contain at least one of the selected words for inclusion.

Overall, 2449 academic papers were found utilising the above search strategy. Funnelling down was done by assessing the papers by abstract, which produced 106 papers that met all inclusion criteria. After removing any duplicates, 89 papers were selected. These went through a full paper screening to assess suitability. In total, 54 papers met all inclusion criteria (i.e., English language studies, online sexually harmful behaviour, only children under 18 were involved in the online harmful behaviour) and were included in the literature review (see Figure 4).

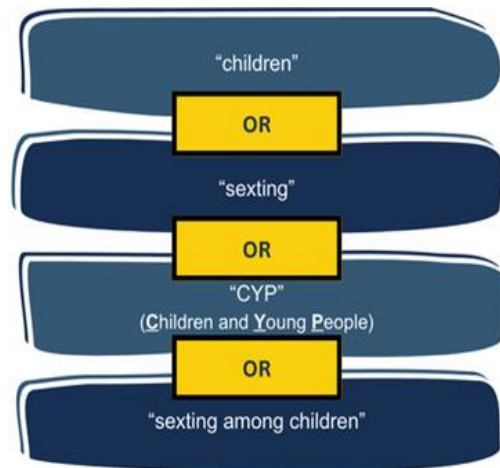


Figure 3: Boolean search operators

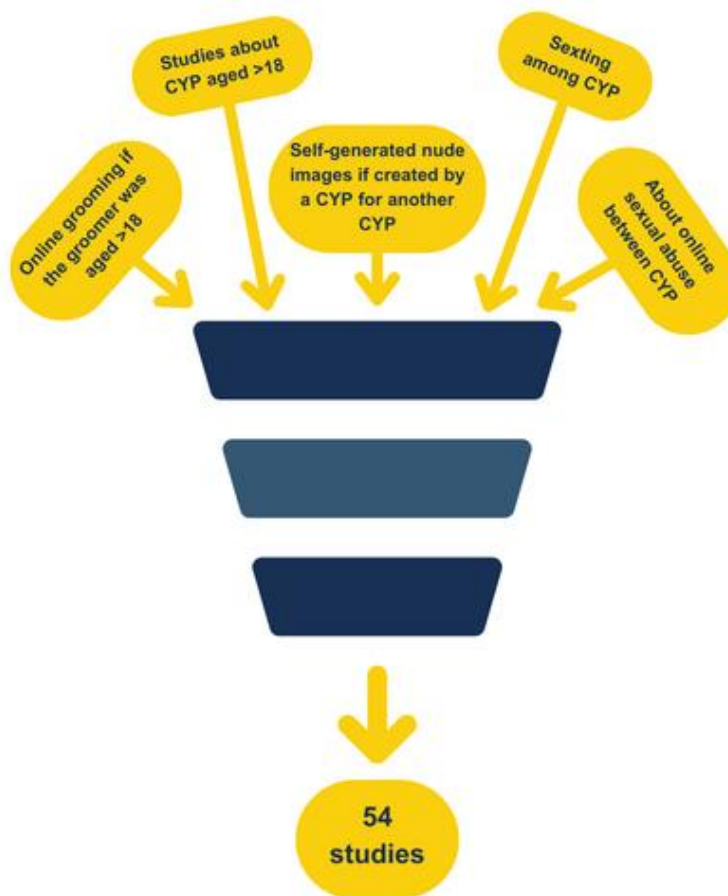


Figure 4: Academic literature funnelling strategy

2.1.2. Systematic review of practitioner literature

A review of educational material and informational campaigns existing within the field of online sexually harmful behaviour between children was conducted. Practitioner literature aimed at children, practitioners, parents and carers was identified from UK child protection and safeguarding services, the Welsh Government, educational platforms, and charities working within the field of safeguarding children. Screening for the practitioner literature took place in March 2023 and no timeframe for the screening of resources was used in the inclusion criteria. Search terms were as shown in Figure 5.

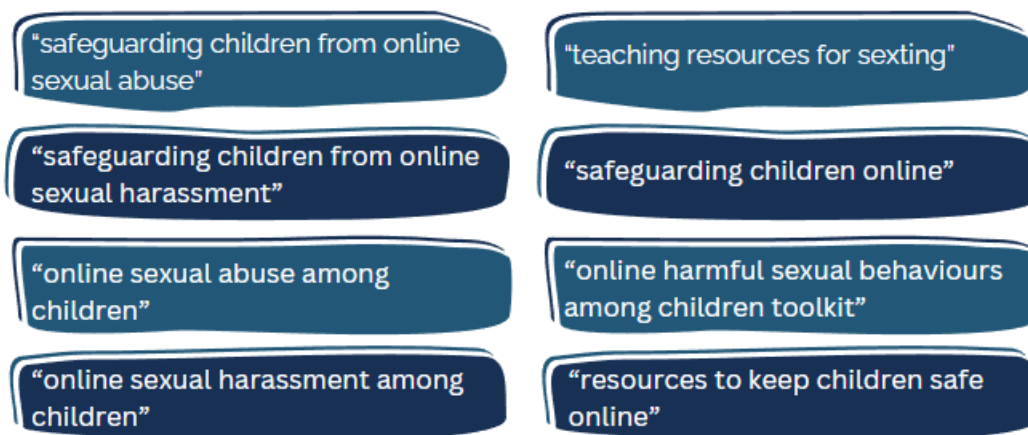


Figure 5: Practitioner literature search terms

Utilising these search terms produced 52 resources. Funnelling down was completed through a process of screening each tool for relevance and excluding resources that did not address online sexually harmful behaviour among children under 18. Within the practitioner literature only 7 sources relevant to child-to-child abuse talk were found.

2.2. What does the academic and practitioner literature tell us?

Within the academic literature there is an extensive body of research that examines contact child-on-child sexually harmful behaviour. However, when it comes to non-contact peer offences there are wide gaps in knowledge that need addressing. Existing literature that focuses on non-contact, online offences usually looks at child victims of adult perpetrators. Most of the existing academic literature on online child-on-child sexually harmful behaviour focuses on sexting and 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material

(CSAM)^{iv}. The focus on sexting could stem from sexting not being inherently illegal if it occurs with the consent of both parties, while sexually harmful online conversations are illegal and therefore harder to detect. Furthermore, 'self-generated' CSAM, although illegal, is widely researched due to the social concerns and constant re-sharing of abuse materials. As a result, great focus has been placed on developing technologies to detect and investigate CSAM^v.

Within both the academic literature as well as the practitioner literature there is a limited focus on online sexually harmful behaviour between children. Additionally, there is a debate around the terminology of online child sexual harassment versus online child sexual abuse, which is particularly visible within the practitioner literature. Official Welsh Government guidance defines this type of offence as follows^{vi}:

“Sexual abuse can happen between children of any age and sex and takes many forms along a continuum ranging from sexual harassment through to contact sexual abuse, including peer sexual exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour. Peer sexual abuse involves children of similar ages/year groups whereas other types of harmful sexual behaviour will involve a large difference in age.”

- Welsh Government (2020: 8)

However, within the academic literature identified via this systematic review, sexually harmful behaviour between children is defined as sexual abuse.

Clear gaps regarding the language used by children within online sexually harmful conversations are found in the academic and practitioner literature. There is no reference to language as a facilitator of these types of online sexually harmful conversations within the academic literature. Additionally, the practitioner literature also has minimal focus on language, with only three resources incorporating any reference to the part played by language to some extent. Within the academic and practitioner literature it is identified that children want educational materials. However, the content of these resources is not addressed. Lastly, only a few practitioner resources are directly aimed at children while there is a lot more material aimed at practitioners.

3. How do children ‘do’ C2CHAT?

3.1. What did we do?

To answer Research Question 2, we linguistically analysed online conversations (chatlogs) shared by law enforcement. We refer to these chatlogs as the C2CHAT dataset (see Table 1 for details). We also linguistically analysed online dating conversations between children.^{vii}






C2CHAT DATASET	
	Entailed children’s negotiation (e.g., requesting, offering, etc.) and discussion of child sexual abuse material (CSAM).
	Consisted of 17 chatlogs (approximately 28,000 words): nine of them were 1-2-1 conversations; the rest were group conversations (number of participants per group ranging between 26 and 82).
	The chatlogs came from conversations that had taken place in 2022.
	Each chatlog contained >1 CSAM negotiation ‘sequence’, that is, a series of turns during which the children discussed different aspects relating to the sending / receiving of the material or to its content, therefore also engaging in ‘sex talk’.
	The chatlogs were redacted by law enforcement prior to analysis by the project research team. The redaction process entailed removing all personal identifiers and replacing all CSAM links with the grading category they belonged to (See https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/glossary/child-sexual-abuse-image-grading/).

Table 1: The C2CHAT dataset

We deployed established methods in Linguistics, as summarised in Figure 6, to answer our research question.

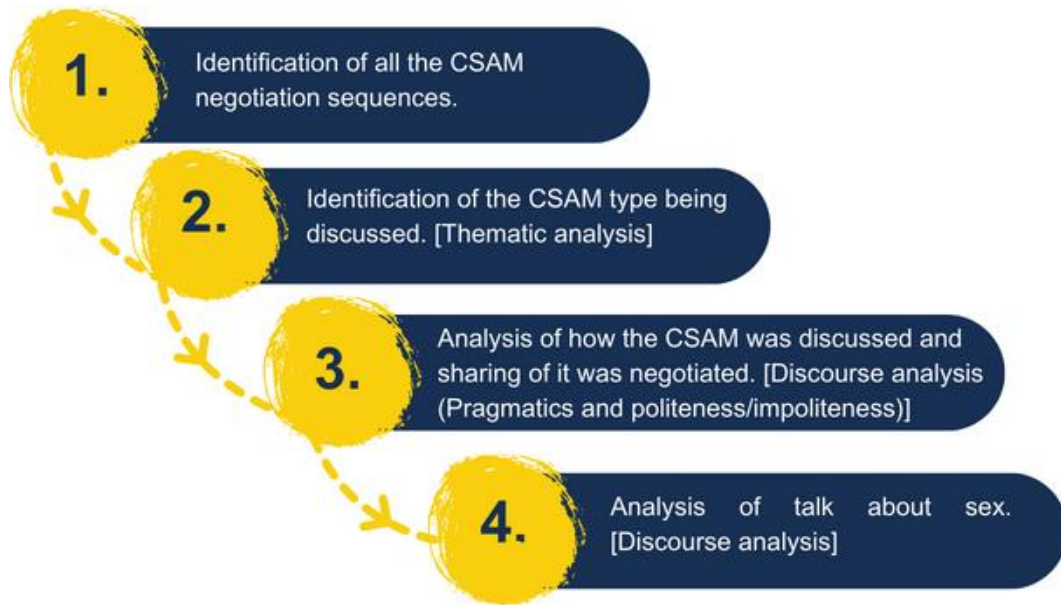


Figure 6: The analysis procedure and frameworks for the C2CHAT dataset

3.2 What does the C2CHAT chatlog analysis tell us?

3.2.1. How much CSAM is discussed, and of what type?

- ① A total of 227 CSAM negotiation sequences were identified.
- ① As seen in Figure 7, the most severe category (Category A) accounted for just over half (51%) of all the CSAM being discussed / negotiated in the dataset.

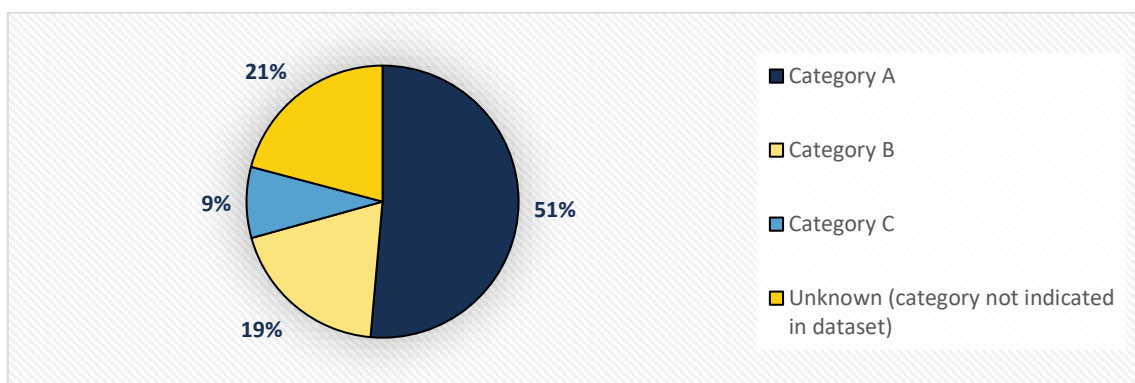


Figure 7: CSAM category distribution in the C2CHAT dataset

As for the type of CSAM (e.g., image, video, etc.), over a third of the sequences (37%) did not contain textual content, that is, the CSAM was sent as one or more hyperlinks, without

any surrounding co-text. The remaining 63% included some textual description of the type of CSAM. Such description:

- ① was generic or vague in 77% of the cases, using words like 'it', 'stuff', 'content', 'cp', etc. In some cases, no actual referent was included. Instead, the word 'trade' was used, without stating what type of CSAM was being requested.
- ① indicated that it consisted of videos (18%) and images (4%).
- ① included sex talk (1%), specifically children describing imagined sexual encounters with one another, or with a child that was not present in the conversation.

3.2.2. How is CSAM negotiated?

For CSAM content to be sent / received, it needs to be offered, requested, etc., that is, CSAM is negotiated through language acts. These acts can be implicit and / or explicit and may be verbalised in ways that support and / or challenge social relations within the digital conversations in which the CSAM is being sent / received.

In the C2CHAT dataset, CSAM was negotiated in terms of it being sought and provided, that is, it entailed a 'core ask' ([see 3.2.2.1](#)) and social relation management in relation to that 'core ask' ([see 3.2.2.2](#)).

3.2.2.1. Verbalising the 'core ask'

Our analysis drew upon a linguistic framework known as Speech Act Theory^{viii}, specifically examining how direct the 'core ask' was. The results are shown in Figure 8.

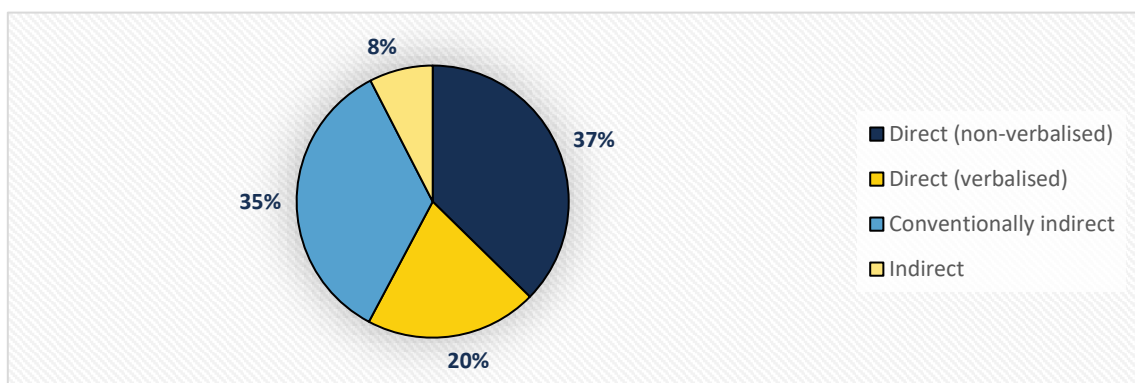


Figure 8: Verbalising the CSAM 'core ask'

The results indicated that the CSAM ask was articulated:

- ① directly in 57% of the cases, either with no verbalisation in 37% of the cases, or via a direct language act, namely a command or an explicit ‘obligation’ or ‘want’ statement (20%).
- ① indirectly in 8% of the cases, via a hint or a suggestion.
- ① somewhere in between directness and indirectness in 35% of the cases, using a conventionally indirect formulae, typically a request formulae / question (e.g., ‘*can you...?*’).

3.2.2.2. Managing social relations in relation to the ‘core ask’

We examined social relations via the linguistic notion of ‘face’ (our public self-image), drawing upon a Linguistics framework known as Discourse Politeness and Impoliteness.^{ix}

When communicating with others, we do ‘facework’, e.g., we use language to manage our own public image and that of those we are interacting with. The latter often entails using language that minimises any perceived imposition on them (e.g., by using ‘please’ we seek to mitigate the imposition of a request) and / or makes them feel liked and appreciated (e.g., by paying compliments). This other-oriented facework is called ‘politeness’. Sometimes, we do not use politeness in conversation – this is not necessarily rude – and, sometimes, we seek to aggravate those we communicate with, for example we are communicatively impolite to them through name-calling, sarcasm, threats, etc.

In the context of C2CHAT in general, and negotiation of CSAM in particular, facework is important. How much / little facework, and of what type, a child uses to access CSAM, for example, is indicative, amongst other things, of how ‘normalised’ such content is in the context in which the child is interacting.

We examined facework in each of the sequences in which CSAM was verbally negotiated, noting whether politeness and / or impoliteness was used (or not). We also examined where in the sequence facework was used, namely whether it was used in the ‘core ask’ or in the surrounding turns within the sequence. The results are shown in Figures 9 and 10, respectively.

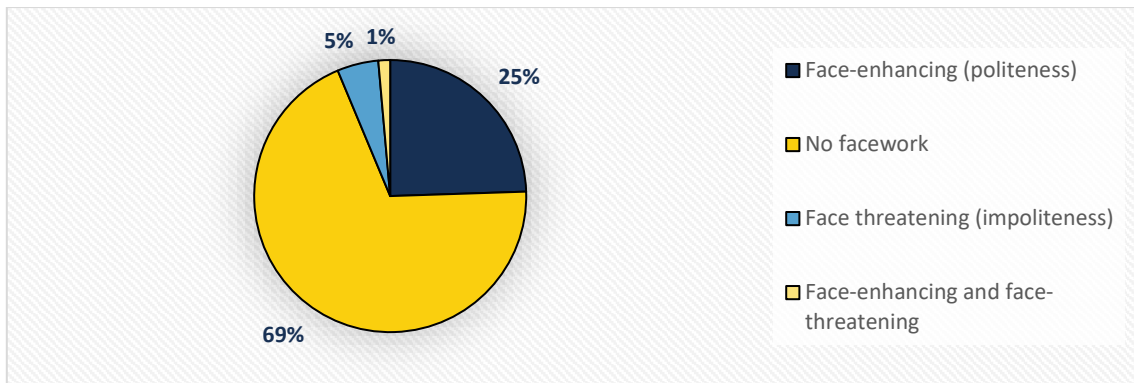


Figure 9: Facework (%) in the 'core ask'

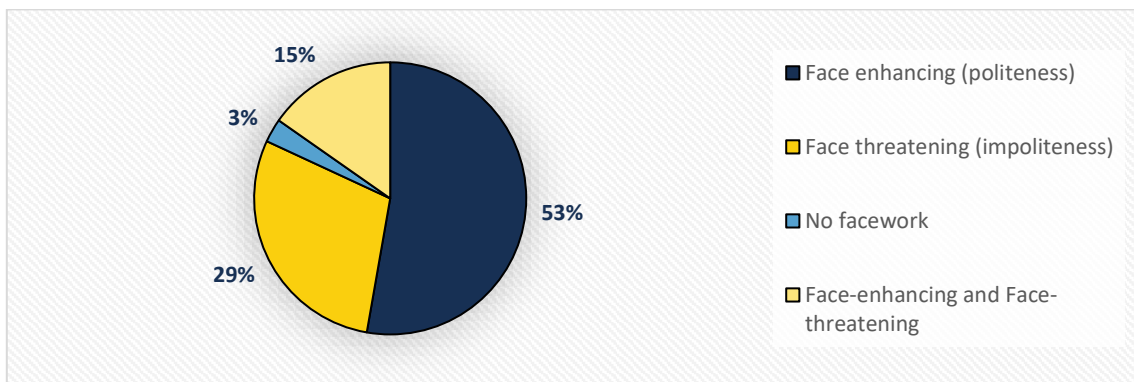


Figure 10: Facework (%) in the text surrounding the 'core ask'

By bringing together the analysis so far, we can see:

- ① **Figure 9:** a prevalence of directness / no facework (69%) in the 'core ask' for CSAM, with politeness being used in one quarter of the cases (25%).
- ① **Figure 10:** a prevalence for using politeness (53%) in the surrounding text, but also a considerable use of impoliteness on its own (29%), or alongside politeness in the surrounding text (15%).

This means that the negotiation of CSAM was done through language acts that were mostly direct, and that a complex mixture of politeness and impoliteness was used. The co-occurrence of impoliteness and marked directness means these sequences were at times particularly forceful and aggressive. The presence of politeness, however, suggests that the children were seeking to maintain interpersonal / intergroup relationships in the dyad / group in a way that supported their communicative goals.

3.2.3. How is sex talk done?

Sex talk was frequent in the dataset. The analysis of the children’s talk about sexual topics in the C2CHAT dataset showed that talk to be primarily oriented towards discussion of the CSAM content (88%), specifically, discussion of the children that were depicted in the CSAM. The remaining sex talk referred either to themselves (2%) or to other people often in general terms (10%).

Sex talk used explicit words most of the time (81%) – sexually implicit terms were less frequent (19%). When implicit sex terms were used, they consisted of adjectives that praised the children depicted in the CSAM (“*cute*”) or the sex act being engaged in (“*That’s hot*”).

Figure 11 shows the different ways in which the sexual identities of the children depicted in the CSAM being sent / received were discussed. Language acts were used that:

- ① dehumanised the depicted children, mainly through objectification and identity reduction to gender (e.g., “*girls*”) and age (e.g., “*toddlers*”) categories. This occurred in 44% of the cases.
- ① reduced the depicted children to passive ‘others’ on which different sexual acts would be / had been performed. This occurred in 29% of the cases.
- ① complimented the depicted children’s sexual features and / or sexual activity, that is, used sexual flattery. This occurred in 22% of the cases.
- ① made generic reference to sexual body parts as the key ‘features’ of children’s anatomy. This happened in 5% of the cases.

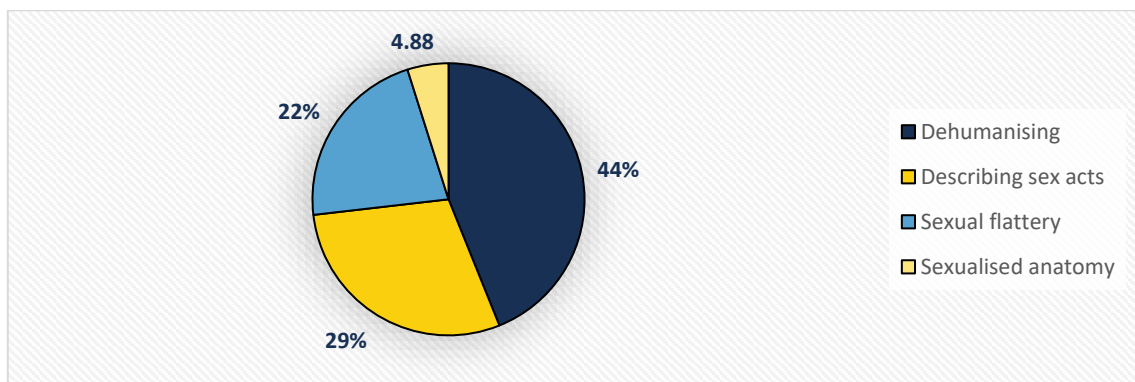


Figure 11: Sex talk (children in the CSAM)



Figure 13: Co-investigator, Ruth Mullineux-Morgan, delivering content during workshop 1

4.2. What does consulting with practitioners, parents and carers tell us?

4.2.1. Barriers to understanding C2CHAT

Practitioners and parents / carers want to understand C2CHAT from a child's perspective, but three barriers prevent them from doing so.

Barrier 1: There is no shared language when it comes to discussing child-to-child sexual abuse

Workshop participants recognised that language is an important - indeed, the main - channel for online sexual harassment between children. They reported hearing sexualised language from the children they work with on a near-daily basis, typically in the form of insults about a peer's perceived sexual behaviour (see Figure 14 for illustrative examples of the terms identified).

They were aware this behaviour also took place - and was likely to be more prevalent - in technology-assisted contexts.



Figure 14: Illustrative terms used by children (as identified by workshop participants)

Despite being able to identify explicit C2CHAT, participants argued that children struggle to recognise more subtle examples, particularly as the language associated with this form of abuse is at times used as terms of endearment / banter.

Barrier 2: The sharing of self-generated nude and semi-nude images is becoming normalised for children

"The sending of dick pics is so prolific that people are reluctant to address one being sent. If schools seek to address one image, they will have to address them all, which results in a lot of work."

- Workshop Participant

The workshop participants reported that requesting and / or sharing of self-generated, sexually explicit images is so commonplace for children that it has become an expected part of growing up. However, children are not always aware that these images are classed as CSAM and are, therefore, illegal to take and send. The

sharing of such images has become so normalised for children that schools feel unequipped to address it on their own.

Barrier 3: There is a lack of standardised training around C2CHAT

There is no clear guidance about C2CHAT for practitioners and parents / carers to follow. As such, it is difficult for them to respond appropriately and consistently to incidents that occur.

"There is little understanding around whose responsibility it is to address incidents of child-to-child sexual abuse/harassment. Parents see the schools as responsible whereas schools see this as a parental responsibility."

- Workshop Participant

The lack of guidance around C2CHAT means it is difficult to know who is responsible for addressing incidents when they occur, leaving individual cases unresolved while ownership is debated. Standardised training for all adults in children's lives was recommended along with clear guidance on the responsibilities of each adult when child-to-child sexual abuse occurs.

"As a parent, there should be clear information about what can and should be communicated with their child around sex and online sexual communication. Child-to-child abuse talk should not be restricted on one particular group (i.e., just teachers). Everyone should be trained on this issue."

- Workshop Participant

4.2.2. What type of resource are needed to help prevent C2CHAT?

During workshop 2, participants were provided with a range of resources that had been identified and reviewed as part of Research Question 1. After careful consideration and review, participants predominantly felt an animation would be the most appropriate resource (see Figure 15) to deliver prevention and support training to help them counter C2CHAT.

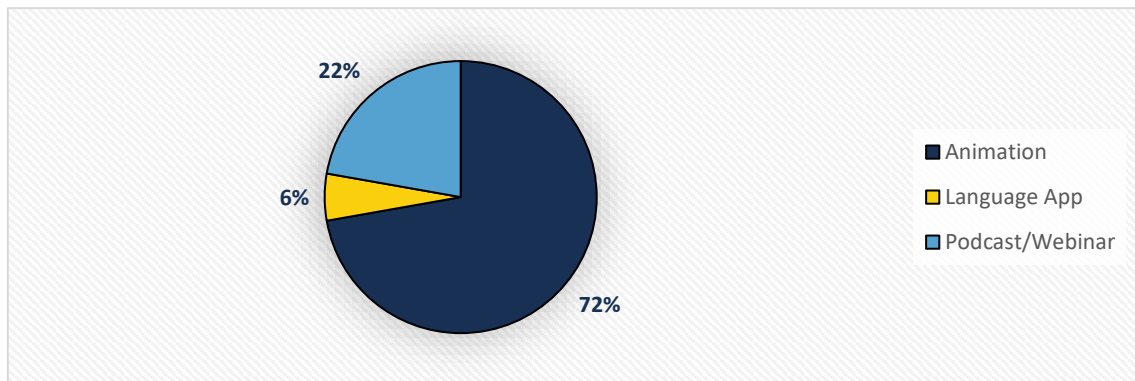


Figure 15: Potential formats for developing anti-C2CHAT resources

Participants' rationale for their selection of an animation included it:

- ✔ reaching a larger audience than a podcast or a webinar.
- ✔ being eye-catching and appealing to children.
- ✔ being easy for both adults and children to use.

When developing this resource, participants recommended that it:

- ✔ is co-produced with children so it reflects their experiences and needs.
- ✔ can be easily embedded within a lesson as a standalone resource.
- ✔ is regularly updated so that it stays relevant.

5. What do children think about C2CHAT?

5.1. What did we do?

Two consultation workshops were conducted with children in February and May 2023 – see Figure 16 for details.

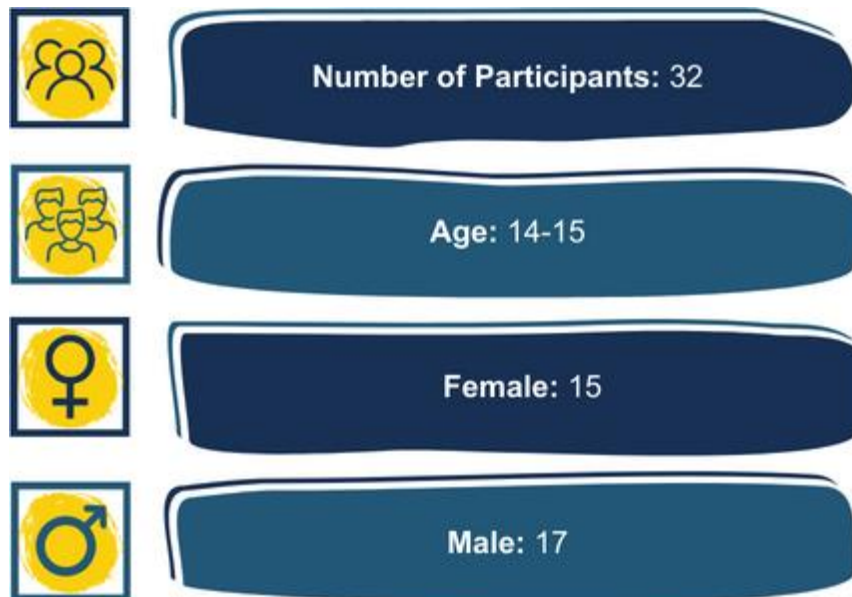


Figure 16: Participants' details for children's workshops^{xi}

These workshops were facilitated by project partner, [Youth Cymru](#). Both workshops were facilitated by an experienced youth worker and a nationally qualified youth worker, alongside a colleague from host organisation, [the Youth Engagement and Participation Service \(YEPS\)](#). A safeguarding lead was also present during both sessions to address any issues that arose from the discussions taking place.

Workshop 1 explored children's perspectives and experiences of C2CHAT through the following questions:

- ① What do you think are the main types of C2CHAT that young people experience in school and the community?
- ② Who can you turn to for support with C2CHAT and what barriers exist when seeking this support?
- ③ What do you think are the words used in C2CHAT?
- ④ What do you need from adults when it comes to reporting C2CHAT?

Workshop 2 evaluated existing resources on C2CHAT to answer the following questions:

- ① How effective do you think existing resources are at providing children with information about C2CHAT?
- ② What type of resource do you think would be most appealing for children?
- ③ What information and / or features would you like to see in future resources about C2CHAT?

The results from the above workshops were then analysed thematically.

5.2. What does consulting with children tell us?

Two themes emerged during the children's workshops:

5.2.1. Children's understanding of relationships, sex and sexuality.

5.2.2. Children's experiences of seeking support for C2CHAT.

5.2.1. Children's understanding of relationships, sex and sexuality

The children participating in the workshops were familiar with C2CHAT, either having direct experience of it or knowing someone who did. As illustrated in Figure 17, this phenomenon was described as taking place between people of a similar age who knew one another and could occur "anywhere at any time", demonstrating how pervasive an issue it is.

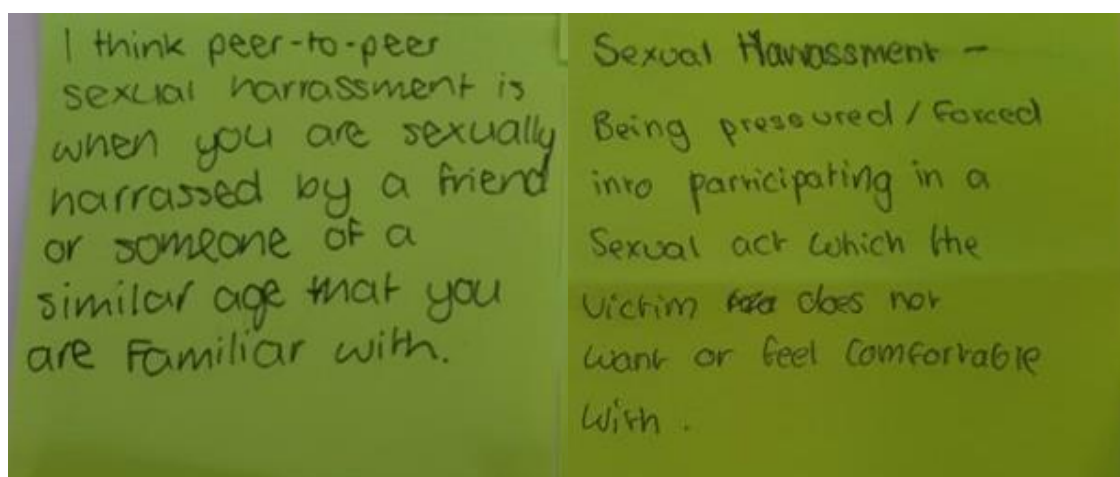


Figure 17: Illustrative examples of definitions of "peer-to-peer sexual harassment" (as identified by workshop participants)

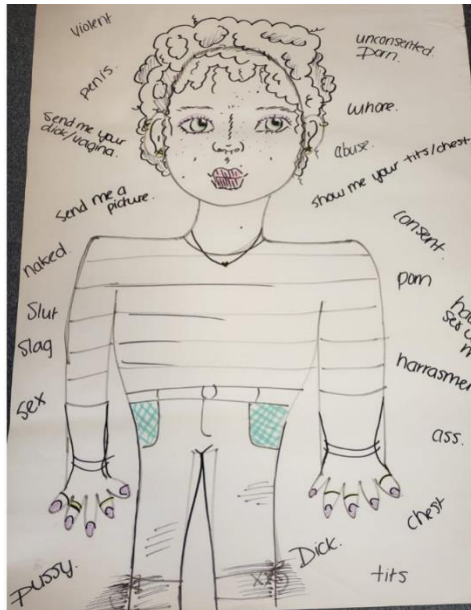


Figure 18: Illustrative example of sexualised language heard by children (as identified by workshop participants)

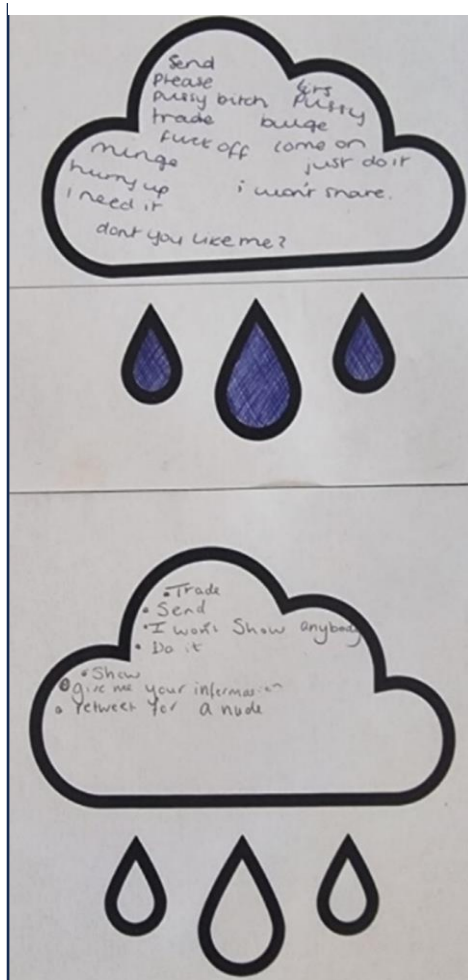


Figure 19: Illustrative examples of coercive language heard by children (as identified by workshop participants)

Despite its prevalence in their lives, children were aware of the importance of consent in relation to C2CHAT. However, while they reported that C2CHAT was only appropriate when both parties consented to it, they also indicated that societal expectations around sex and sexuality often over-rode the ‘need’ for consent. For example, some children expressed the expectation that wearing “revealing clothes” meant “you were asking for it”.

The children were able to identify a broad range of explicit, sexualised language relating to C2CHAT during both workshops (see Figure 18). The language generated during workshop 2 in particular illustrated the normalisation of C2CHAT, the expectation that children participate in it and the persuasive steps taken to encourage them to (see Figure 19).

The same explicit, sexualised language was also used by the children to discuss people they were attracted to. This finding demonstrates some confusion around the appropriate language to use when complimenting someone online on their physical features.

5.2.2. Children’s experiences of seeking support to counter C2CHAT

Children were keen to access support when it came to C2CHAT and demonstrated no preference for what format this support should take (e.g., a dedicated member of staff to talk to, a lesson embedded into their Relationships and Sexuality Education classes, an assembly, etc.). They were aware that they could turn to the adults in their lives for support, identifying parents, teachers and youth workers in particular as people they could speak to about C2CHAT. However, they were reluctant to do so for fear of being judged,

blamed or not being taken seriously (see Figure 20).

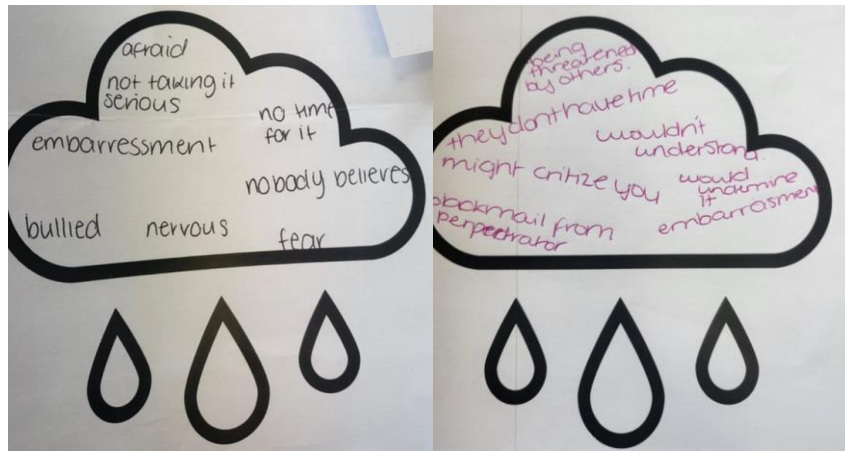


Figure 20: Illustrative examples of reasons behind children’s reluctance to disclose peer-to-peer sexual harassment (as identified by workshop participants)

To feel secure reaching out for support regarding C2CHAT, the children participating in the workshops requested (see Figure 21) that adults:

- ① Make the time and space for children to come to them about their concerns.
- ① Demonstrate knowledge and understanding about C2CHAT.
- ① Show children greater empathy by not judging them or making them feel embarrassed for what has happened.
- ① Protect their confidentiality.

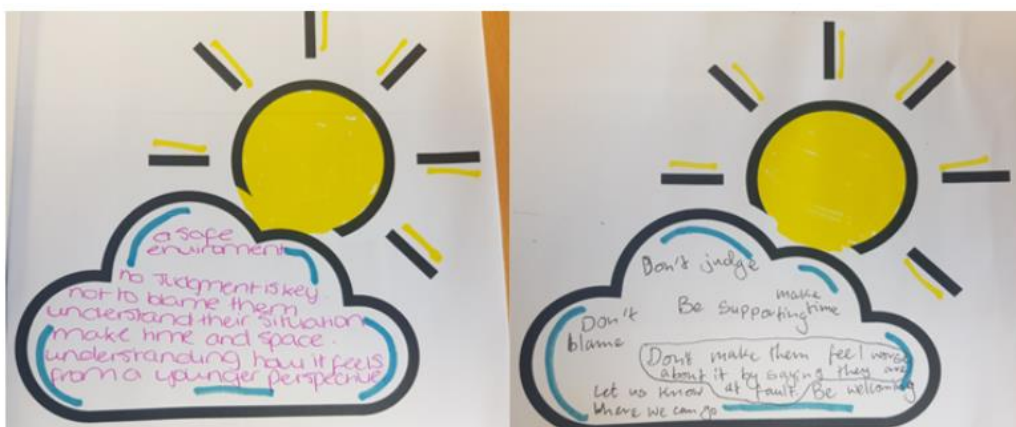


Figure 21: Illustrative examples of what children need to disclose peer-to-peer sexual harassment (as identified by workshop participants)

6. Conclusions and next steps

Our analyses regarding Research Questions 1-3 confirm that language matters greatly in C2CHAT. In an online context, it is a core way that this form of unwelcome sexual behaviour is conducted and manifested. The development of the Welsh Government Action Plan provides an opportunity to develop and disseminate preventative resources for child safeguarding practitioners, parents, carers and children. Our project shows that the findings from language-based research are a core part of this preventative approach. Our Blueprint (see [Project website](#)) indicates how resources bringing a focus on language as action would bring considerable added value, fill a gap in current knowledge and complement existing resources. During this project our workshop participants (practitioners, parents, carers and children) all agreed that an original digital animation would be the best format for such innovative new resources. This resource should:

- ☑ Be co-designed, co-produced and user-tested by children.
- ☑ Show how words are action in C2CHAT.
- ☑ Take a child's rights and consent-centred approach.
- ☑ Bring adults and children closer together to understand C2CHAT from the same perspective.
- ☑ Complement and add value to existing resources into technology-assisted sexual harassment between children.



C2CHAT

CHILD TO CHILD ABUSE TALK

Web: <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/project-dragon-s/c2chat>

Cyngor Cyllido Addysg
Uwch Cymru
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ⁱ The C2CHAT Project team consists of experts in the analysis of digital harmful interactions, specialising in developing and implementing research evidenced interventions for countering different manifestations of child sexual abuse. Project members:

Principal Investigator: Prof. Nuria Lorenzo-Dus.

Project Co-Investigator: Ruth Mullineux-Morgan.

Researcher (Linguistics): Keighley Perkins.

Researcher (Criminology): Leonie Themelidis.

Project Officer: Lara MacNeill.

ⁱⁱ We are grateful to our Advisory Group members / project partners for their support regarding, in particular, participant recruitment and access to and preparation of chatlog datasets ready for analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Moher, D., Shamseer, L., Clarke, M., Ghersi, D., Liberati, A., Petticrew, M., Shekelle, P., Stewart, L. A., & PRISMA-P Group (2015). Preferred reporting items for systematic review and meta-analysis protocols (PRISMA-P) 2015 statement. *Systematic Review*, 4(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/2046-4053-4-1>

^{iv} See INHOPE (2022, November 10). What is self-generated CSAM? *INHOPE*.

<https://www.inhope.org/EN/articles/what-is-self-generated-csam>

^v See Themelidis and Lorenzo-Dus (under review) for details.

^{vi} See Welsh Government (2020). Guidance for education settings on peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour. <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-10/guidance-for-education-settings-on-peer-sexual-abuse-exploitation-and-harmful-sexual-behaviour.pdf>

^{vii} Space constrains precludes inclusion of this aspect of the analysis here. For details see Lorenzo-Dus et al (forthcoming).

^{viii} See, e.g., Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words?* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1984). Requests and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP). *Applied linguistics*, 5(3), 196-213.

^{ix} See, e.g., Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (Vol. 4). Cambridge University Press; Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence* (Vol. 28). Cambridge University Press.

^x For further details on the methodology and findings for this and the children's workshops see Mullineux-Morgan, Perkins and Lorenzo-Dus (forthcoming).

^{xi} The children participating in the workshops were asked to describe how they gender identify. The figures reflect the gender that each child assigned for themselves.