



# BUILDING SAFER CHILDHOOD - REVIEW OF THE SAFETY SKILLS EDUCATION MODEL OF OULU

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## Forewords

In December 2018 a series of sexual abuse crimes against minor girls in Oulu, Finland came into public knowledge. The offenders were men with foreign background, and they had contacted the girls in social media. The publicity of the crime series created an atmosphere of fear in the city of Oulu. The crimes were also noticed on a national level, in (social) media and the government. Different ministries of Finland offered financial support for actions of sexual abuse prevention. In order to protect the children from further abuse and to help the citizens of Oulu feel safe again, the Safe Oulu project 2019-2022 was launched with the **main objective of preventing sexual crimes against minors in Oulu.**

The secondary objectives of the project have been:

- reduce the amount and threat of sexual crimes and sexual harassment
- strengthen the role of children and youth as active members of the community
- support and increase the knowledge of families to prevent sexual offences
- strengthen the media and safety skills of children, youth, and parents
- strengthen the integration of immigrants to the community
- prevent recidivism and rehabilitate young offenders

The project consists of seven sections

1. Fostering the safety skills education of children and youth
2. Strengthening the training and know-how of the professionals to prevent sexual crimes
3. Strengthening the psycho-social support of children and youth
4. Multidisciplinary model of facing the youth during their leisure time
5. Fostering the self-esteem of youth – stories from the City of Oulu
6. Making the integration of immigrants more effective
7. Rehabilitating young offenders

This paper will offer a short review on the reasoning behind selecting safety skills education as one section of the project e.g., children's rights, research, and national and international recommendations. It will also explain how the project fits the picture the above-mentioned documents draw on good actions to combat sexual violence against children and analyses some of the information and data gathered on the project actions at this point of the project. The first parts of the paper will discuss the safety skills education per se. The final chapter will discuss the other important result of the safety skills education –team of the project, to wit, securing the continuum of the safety skills education in the city of Oulu after the project ends. The seven sections of the project have not worked in isolation but have supported and completed the work of each other. Thus, the work of other sections of the Safe Oulu project are referred in this paper when needed.

The Finnish National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025 defines safety skills education as follows:

*'Safety skills education' refers to the comprehensive strengthening of children's own resources, positive body image and self-esteem, as well as their means of coping. In this way, children learn skills that promote the safety of the relationships between them and other people and provide them with the skills to avoid being subjected to violence, bullying, solicitation and harassment. In situations where a child has become the victim of various types of violence, the goal of safety skills education is to ensure that children have the means and skills to protect themselves and defend their boundaries (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025, 22)*

The Safety skills education model of Oulu, which has been developed during the Safe Oulu project, consist of the following actions:

- The obligation to give safety skills education in pre-schools and basic education has been added to the core curriculums of Oulu. These changes include learning goals. The core curriculums guide the work of schools and pre-schools in Oulu and the changes also fulfil the demands of the national core curriculum for basic education. Thus, from the school year 2021-2022 onwards all pre-primary schools and schools of Oulu give safety skills education.
- [Freely available learning materials](#) on safety skills education for pre-primary education and classes 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and 7-9 in basic education were created and are in use. The learning materials take into account the developmental level of children. The learning materials include learning goals and ready lesson plans for the teachers and other professionals to use.
- All the basic education teachers and pre-primary education units of Oulu received training on safety skills education and an in-service training plan on preventing sexual violence against minors for other professionals was created and executed.
- Each basic education unit has selected 1-2 teachers, who are in charge of the safety skills education in their school. The selected teachers have been educated on the task. This task has been added to the work complexity assessment system of the city of Oulu and thus the change guarantees each selected teacher an additional fee while they have this responsibility.
- A list of safety skills educators has been created, consisting of local teachers and other professionals who have been educated on the subject by the Safe Oulu project. These safety skills educators can be booked by schools when (re)education on the subject is needed.
- Engaging parents in safety skills education is crucial for its success and thus parents are supported in safety skills education. This support includes e.g. parental evenings and webinars for parents, home assignments to be made with parents in the created learning materials, exercise book for children and parents about safety skills and an animation on digital safety skills.
- The Finnish Basic Education Act demands that there is a plan on protecting pupils from bullying, harassment, and violence in each municipality. Safety skills education has been added as a part of this co-created plan in Oulu. This fosters the commitment of the city of Oulu to safety skills education and it guides the daycare, preschool, basic education, upper secondary education and vocational education units of the city of Oulu to give safety skills education.
- Guide of "Psycho-social support" ("Practical instructions for professionals working in the educational sector for the situations when sexual abuse, harassment and grooming of children are revealed") and "Crisis management manual" for schools were created in order to help the professionals act properly when a crisis emerges e.g. a pupil is a victim of a sexual crime or other type of violence.

The safety skills education model from pre-primary school to the end of basic education created in Oulu strengthens a child's self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and confidence, fosters good emotional and communication skills, promotes good relationships with peers as well as coping and digital safety skills. Safety skills education enhances children's skills in setting and protecting their boundaries against bullying, violence, harassment, and grooming. Safety skills education comprehensively augments children's resources and survival skills. The children will learn that they have the right to live and grow in safety, also online. Especially vulnerable children have been and are taken into account in the model e.g., with parental events and trainings for professionals working with the vulnerable groups of children.

The model has won the [annual crime prevention competition of The National Council for Crime Prevention in 2021](#) and was selected to present Finland in the European Crime Prevention Network's European Crime Prevention Award 2021. [In this competition the model came second.](#) The model has been selected to [the evaluation of The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre on methods preventing bullying](#) and the results of the evaluation will be published in August 2022.

The model was first tested with a pilot safety skills education entity during the school year 2019-2020. The pilot was executed in four pilot schools and pre-primary units. The staff of the units was educated on a pilot safety skills education training and pilot safety skills education learning materials were given to them to be used during the school year. The trainings and learning materials were developed further based on the experiences of the pilot.

Other materials, such as Cartoons [Secret](#) and [Elinan päiväkirjasta \(Elina's Diary\)](#) including teachers materials and letter to parents, have been developed as age appropriate tools of discussion and learning. More materials to support this work will be published in multiple languages during the spring 2022. The new materials, as well as all the other materials can be found on the webpages of the model [www.turvataitokasvatus.fi](http://www.turvataitokasvatus.fi).<sup>1</sup> All materials are free to use.

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<sup>1</sup> turvataitokasvatus is the Finnish word for Safety skills education.

# Sexual violence and harassment against children and the Rights of the Child

## Scale of the problem

Sexual violence against children is common in Europe and it has long term, wide-ranging and serious life-long consequences for victims, and it causes significant and long-term social harm. The Council of Europe estimates that in Europe, one in five children fall victim to some form of sexual violence and in many cases the perpetrators are persons they know and trust, and on whom the children are dependent. This makes these crimes particularly difficult to prevent and detect. ([EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse](#), 1)

Research indicates that sexual violence against children seldom involves the use of force, more commonly, the perpetrator manipulates the child to gain the child's trust and conceal abuse. The acts are not isolated, often the violence continues for several weeks, even years, and the acts tend to become more serious over time. The child is typically prepared by the perpetrator by sexualising the relationship gradually over time ('grooming') At the moment much of the sexual violence against children also takes place online. (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025, 296)

According to the statistic of Police of Finland the amount of sexual offences reported to the police are on the rise. This has been the case for a longer time. It has been explained that the threshold to report the crimes is getting lower, which can be seen in the statistics. As sexual offences are still mainly a hidden crime, the statistics seen below should be discussed together with the results of victim surveys or other statistics which are based on questionnaires to the selected sections of the citizen.

<b>Finland: Amount of reported crimes, pcs</b>	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2020/ 2021 +/-	2020/2021 +/- %
<b>Sexual offenses in total</b>	3 338	3 331	3 856	4 466	4 472	5361	889	19,88 %
<b>Child sexual abuse in total</b>	1 245	1 188	1 410	1 862	1 804	2089	285	15,80 %
<b>Rape, Coercion into a sexual act, in total</b>	1 167	1 262	1 400	1 476	1 464	1 831	367	25,07 %
<b>Other sexual crimes, in total<sup>2</sup></b>	926	881	1 046	1 128	1 204	1 441	237	19,68 %

Table 1. Selection of crimes reported to the Police of Finland 2016-2021

Source: Poliisin tietoon tulleet rikokset rikosryhmittäin ja -nimikkeittäin poliisilaitoksittain Tilaston ajanjakso ilmoituspäivän mukaan. Poliisin tulostietojärjestelmä PolStat 12.1.2022 02:32:01

<sup>2</sup> Includes also crimes against children and youth such as solicitation of a child for sexual purposes, purchase of sexual services from a young person and attempts of both mentioned crimes.

According to School Health Promotion study 2021 the experiences of sexual violence and sexual harassment are also on the rise compared to the numbers of 2019 in Finland.

<b>Children on grades 4. and 5. (10-11 years old)</b>	<b>2019 Girls</b>	<b>2021 Girls</b>	<b>2019 Boys</b>	<b>2021 Boys</b>	<b>Number of children in 2021 survey who have experienced violence in total</b>
During the last year had experienced sexual toned touching or coercion <sup>3</sup>	1,7 %	2,7 %	1,6 %	1,9 %	around 2370 children
During the last year had experienced sexual toned comments, suggestions, or messages or had been shown sexual toned pictures	4,5 %	10,1 %	4,3 %	6,3 %	around 8560 children

*Table 2. School health promotion study 2021 experiences of sexual violence and harassment on grades 4. and 5. (Source: School Health Promotion study)*

<b>Children on grades 8. and 9. (14-15 years old)</b>	<b>2019 Girls</b>	<b>2021 Girls</b>	<b>2019 Boys</b>	<b>2021 Boys</b>	<b>Number of children in 2021 survey who have experienced violence in total</b>
During the last year had experienced sexual violence <sup>4</sup>	9,7 %	13,4 %	4,3 %	5,0 %	around 8343 children
During the last year had experienced disturbing sexual toned suggestions or harassment.	32,3 %	48,4 %	8,2 %	10,5 %	around 26 850 children

*Table 3. School health promotion study 2021 experiences of sexual violence and harassment on grades 8. and 9. (Source: School Health Promotion study)*

In the School Health Promotion study e.g., 45 939 girls in the grades 8. and 9. had answered the question about sexual violence during the last 12 months in 2021. And 13,4 % of them had been forced to remove clothes, touched on intimate areas against their will, had been pressured or coerced to coitus or other type of sexual intercourse or/and had been offered money, goods, or intoxicants in exchange for sex. (School Health Promotion study) That means that over 6 150 girls aged between 14-15 years had experienced severe sexual violence in Finland during one year. If we compare that number to the statistics of the Police of Finland, we can

<sup>3</sup> Based on the number of children who answered yes on one or both questions: Someone has touched your breasts or genitals against your will? OR Someone has pressured or coerced you to touch his/her breasts or genitals?

<sup>4</sup> Based on the number of children who answered yes on at least one of the questions: Someone has forced you to remove your clothes OR touched your intimate areas against your will OR has pressured or coerced you to coitus of other type of sexual intercourse OR has offered you money, goods or intoxicants in exchange for sex?

see that even the total amount of sexual offences reported to the police is much smaller than the result of the study. And this should not be the case.

The Finnish Child Victim Survey indicates that:

- The majority (80%) of children had reported telling someone, most commonly a friend, about having experienced sexual violence.
- Only about a quarter (26%) had told an adult about it
- 12% had reported it to a public authority.

The reasons behind non-disclosure were that the victim had not believed that the incident was serious enough, or that they did not personally consider it to be sexual violence. (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025, 299)

Children live in a multimedia world and modern communication tools are an important, useful, and joyful part of their everyday lives. But at the same time the negative sides of these tools should not be forgotten. Safe the Children Finland conducted a survey on grooming in Finland during the spring 2021. According to the results:

- Girls and children who did not wish to determine their gender were more likely to be victims of grooming
- Children with a contact to mental health services were more likely to be victims of grooming
- 62 % of the children told that they had been contacted by a person they knew or suspected to be an adult or a person 5 years older than they were
- 17 % of the children received sexual-toned messages weekly and 29% at least once a month
- 13 % of the children received nude pictures weekly and 25 % at least once a month
- Only 8 % of the girls told that they had never received sexual-toned messages
- 25 % of the girls receive messages that ask for nude pictures at least once a month, 38% receive these messages a couple of times a year
- 67 % of the children had told about the grooming to someone but in majority of the cases they told it to a friend (93 %)
- Only 4 % had told about the grooming to police or child protection services
- Close friendships and discussions with parents about their online behaviour protected children from grooming

(Save the children 2021, 20, 23-24, 30)

[The report of Europol](#) found out that the amount of online child sexual abuse material, CSAM (formerly known as child porn) detected continues to increase, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The report also highlights that:

- Online offender communities exhibit considerable resilience and are continuously evolving
- Livestreaming of child sexual abuse continues to increase and became even more prevalent during the COVID-19 crisis
- A recent case shows CSAM production also takes place in the EU
- The commercialisation of online CSE is becoming a more widespread issue

(Europol 2020, 34-41)

## The children have the right to live and grow safely

The EU Member States, including Finland, have committed in protecting the children from violence and abuse. E.g., the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights recognises that children have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being, and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the right of the child to be protected from all forms of violence. ([EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse](#), 1)

The children are also entitled to have knowledge on their rights and ways of protecting themselves. All 47 Council of Europe member states, including Finland, have [signed, and ratified](#) the Council of Europe Convention on



*Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, also known as “the Lanzarote Convention”. The Article 6 – *Education for children of the Lanzarote Convention* obligates the states as follows:

*“Each Party shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that children, during primary and secondary education, receive information on the risks of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, as well as on the means to protect themselves, adapted to their evolving capacity. This information, provided in collaboration with parents, where appropriate, shall be given within a more general context of information on sexuality and shall pay special attention to situations of risk, especially those involving the use of new information and communication technologies.”*(The Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 16)

The Lanzarote Convention also states that necessary legislative or other measures need to be taken among persons working e.g., in education, health, social protection and leisure activities to encourage awareness of the protection and rights of children, of an adequate knowledge of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and of the means to identify them. (The Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 15)

Also the [EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse](#) calls for actions that raise awareness to help inform children, parents, carers and educators about risks and preventive mechanisms and procedures and create learning materials. Providing focused training, children’s need to have knowledge and tools that could help them not to be confronted with the abuse when possible (e.g., on how to use the web safely), and the need to be informed that certain behaviours are not acceptable are mentioned in the strategy. The strategy states that: *“When abuse occurs, children need to feel secure and empowered to speak up, react and report, even when the abuse comes from within their circle of trust (i.e. loved ones or other people they know and trust), as it is often the case.”*([EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse](#), 10-11)

In addition, WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA have created standards for sexuality education, which include e.g., a table of what children should learn at each age and instructions on how to deliver sexuality education. ([WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe A framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists](#)) These standards have been a base for the safety skills education path created in the Safe Oulu project.

## Research on safety skills education

In international studies, safety skills education programmes have been found to:

- Increase children’s knowledge of sexual violence,
- Cause children to improve safety through their behaviour,
- Encourage children to tell about violence,
- Reduce adverse effects (guilt, self-blame, shame)
- Create a more sensitive environment for helping victims.

Evidence also suggests that the knowledge and skills acquired do not decrease over time. (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025, 166-167) A recent research paper also shows that the students who didn’t participate in child sexual abuse prevention programs were significantly more likely to be abused than those who did, which highlights the importance of universal CSA prevention programs in schools as one part of comprehensive prevention. (Kenny & al. 2020)

The Finnish experiences have also been positive. According to the data that was collected in individual schools in Finland in the early 2000s the educators felt that the children had been enthusiastic about ‘safety lessons’, during which they had been able to talk about things that are important to them and learn from one another. The education has been most effective when implemented in collaboration with homes, and homework has also

sparked and supported a thematic discussion between children and adults in families. (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025, 173–174) The experiences of the pilot units of the Safe Oulu project are discussed in the next chapters.

Research also shows that safety skills education programmes have not caused any negative psychological effects, such as fear or anxiety, even in young children. Sometime concerns have been raised that the teaching of safety skills fuels children's fears but that has not been the case, based on both studies and practical experience. On the opposite children's feeling of safety has been strengthened by experiencing what it feels like to be able to influence situations and by knowing how to act. Safety skills education is safe when the working methods are:

- child-oriented,
- inclusive of the child,
- collaborative and supportive of children's survival and empowerment.

The children's current issues and interests and their own experiences are the starting point of the child-focused approach as well as working through ways that are natural to children. (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025, 166–167, 174)

## Research on the perpetrators and characteristics of sexual violence against children

A recent study *Seksuuallirikosten tekijät, tekoilanteet ja ennaltaehkäisemisen mahdollisuudet (Sex crime offenders, characteristics and possibilities for prevention)* gathered and increased the knowledge on the perpetrators of sexual violence that we have in Finland and gave also recommendations on the prevention based on the knowledge.

The results showed e.g., that weak social skills, experiences on lack of power, difficult relationships with other adults, low self-esteem, experiences of humiliation and sexual problems are connected to the sexual abuse of children more than sociodemographic or social status indicators. All of the perpetrators are not paedophiles or hebephiles, but some are situational abusers. And not all paedophiles commit crimes. Emotional identification with children is a major risk factor. The perpetrators of sexual violence against children were mostly young men, also underage men were a major perpetrator group. In cases of sexual abuse, the perpetrators were typically a family member, father, stepfather, or a partner of the mother or another relative. Quite often the perpetrator was also a person the victim was dating or had dated with, a friend or some other person they knew. Sexual violence experienced by young people generally takes place among peers who know each other which should be taken into account when planning actions on prevention. The research suggests that the myths that we have on sexual crimes should be discussed critically, as they seem to be wrong. The study also recommends that sexual education should be long-lasting enough and the knowledge shared should be based on research and be pedagogised for the audience, and especially younger users of social media should be educated on recognising grooming and the limits of unsafe communication. (Vauhkonen & al 2021., 9,25-26, 30, 50, 59-60, 117-118)

As teaching children and youth social skills, strengthening their self-esteem and strengthening their abilities to survive setbacks and hardships are at the core of safety skills education, the education will also have an effect on the (possible) perpetrators. As the perpetrators of sexual violence against children were mostly young men, also underage men and sexual violence experienced by young people generally takes place among peers who know each other, it is important that children learn to respect each other's boundaries from the early age onwards. In the most positive scenarios, the young people who recognise paedophilic or hebephiliac tendencies

in their minds, will receive information on the help services provided to them during the safety skills education, before any crimes happen.

[Protect Children](#) has implemented and is implementing surveys on CSAM<sup>5</sup> users worldwide. In the early analysis that the NGO has made of the results of over 8000 answers the results are alarming. 70 % of the CSAM users told that the first time they saw CSAM material, they were under 18 years old. Nearly 40 % of them were under 13 years old. Protect Children list several reasons for this early exposure. These children may have searched for the material voluntarily out of curiosity or interest, they may have been shown CSAM as part of their sexual abuse or exploitation or they may have started viewing legal, adult pornography at a young age and begun to consume increasingly more extreme material as they became desensitised to the material. Exposure to CSAM material in early age in all of these cases can be defined as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), which might have far-reaching negative and harmful impact on wellbeing and development of the child. Also these results show that not all of the CSAM users are paedophiles or hebephiles. Other reasons behind the behaviour include pornography escalation, sexual abuse in own childhood and other trauma. The survey did not include background questions (e.g. age gender), but an open-ended question: "How would you describe yourself? I am..." In this question age became one classification group of preliminary results. Many mentioned age, which was often young age, e.g. 14 years old. Also, in the group of answerers who said that they did not need help related to CSAM consumption, there were people who said that they don't need help, because it is OK for them to watch this material as they are underage themselves too. (Insoll & al 2021, 10, 14, 18, 50, 55)

From the perspective of safety skills education, one might ask what would have happened if all the answerers who had been exposed to CSAM when underage (or are exposing at the moment) had known their right to grow in safety and had known e.g., the three-step rule to threatening or confusing situations, which encourages children and youth to tell an adult about the situation. It is important that the children know how to act when they see this type of material, and teaching this is one part of the safety skills education.

## Building the know-how to create a safer Oulu

### Training for the professionals

The Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children states that providing teachers with training on safety skills education is very important. *"The study modules in degree programmes at universities and other higher education institutions should include the study of safety skills and mental health skills, and the subject should also be included in continuing education."* (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025, 175).

Before the safety skills education trainings for the teachers in schools and pre-primary schools in Oulu started, Laura Metsävainio made her Master's Thesis in co-operation with the Safe Oulu project to figure out what kind of knowhow the staff of early childhood education have on sexual abuse of children, what kind of knowledge they would need and what kind of training the staff should be provided with on the subject in the future. According to the study, 70 % of the persons who answered the initial survey felt that they did not have enough information on sexual violence against children. Also, the instructions on how to act in the situations when cases of sexual violence against children become known or suspected at the day care, were unclear, the staff did not know if these instructions existed or there was no instruction at all. The study showed that there is a need for training on these subjects among early childhood education staff, also during their studies. (Metsävainio 2021, 56, 58-59, 63)

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<sup>5</sup> Child sexual abuse material

At the end of the school year 2020-2021 voluntary teachers of the safety skills education pilot units were interviewed. The interviews were recorded, and they were analysed in order to evaluate how the safety skills education has started in the units and what kind of early effects it has had. In these interviews also the pre-primary and basic education teachers told that there is a need for safety skills education training and almost all of them hoped that in the future there would be this type of training also during the teacher studies at the university. The positive sign in these interviews (which were done after the teachers had received training on safety skills education) compared to the study of Metsävainio was that the teachers told that they would know how to act if they would suspect or know about a case of sexual violence against a child (or in other worrying cases). The teachers also described that there is help and instructions available at their workplace for these situations.

Throughout the project the numbers of events and trained professionals have been followed by the project. Heretofore the project has trained over 400 professionals and there has been over 100 training sessions. Employees of the project collected anonymous feedback before, after and 2 months after the in-service trainings to 1) develop the trainings further and 2) follow the impacts of the trainings in a longer term. Changes were made accordingly. The anonymous feedback collected from the pilot in-service training for the pre-primary and basic education found out e.g., that

- 100% of the preschool teachers gave the training grade 5 (on a scale of 1-5) and
- 100% said that they have more knowledge on the subject, and they will use the acquired knowledge in their work
- 83% of the basic education teachers gave the training grade 5 or 4 (on a scale of 1-5) and
- 96% said that they obtained useful knowledge and skills

The teachers commented the trainings e.g., as follows:

*"The training [the safety skills education training] awakened me to notice the importance of safety skills on the level of attitude. I will discuss the matters with the pupils more easily."*

*"It brings me inner security as a teacher. Every time issues are discussed/ thought together beforehand it also strengthens my own knowledge."<sup>6</sup>*

To secure the continuum of the know how in Oulu and the distribution of it to a wider audience, the project has collected a list of safety skills educators, consisting of national experts the project has used and local teachers who have been educated on the subject by the project. The list will be published on the [turvataitokasvatus.fi](http://turvataitokasvatus.fi) -net page. These safety skills educators can be booked by schools or municipalities when (re)education on the subject is needed. E.g. when other municipalities launch same type of projects or when a school in Oulu needs re-education on the subject after staff changes.

A MOOC online course on the Safety skills education model of Oulu and sexual violence against children has been developed together with Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The course is free and open to all interested professionals. The aim of the course is to share the good practices of Oulu to a wider audience of professionals and to offer the professionals of Oulu a possibility to (re)educate themselves on the subject. More information on the course is available in Finnish on the [turvataitokasvatus.fi](http://turvataitokasvatus.fi) - webpages.

## Learning materials

The project did not want to reinvent the wheel. At the beginning of the project national key partners were recognised. Experts in safety skills education and the experts of the Family Federation of Finland were contacted. The materials they have created have been a major source for the project learning materials and they have shared their expertise during the creation of the learning materials. Also, during the pilot, feedback from the teachers

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<sup>6</sup> Translations from the original feedback in Finnish.

and children was collected in order to develop the learning materials better. The goal was to create materials that are user-friendly and up to date for the teachers. The textbooks are visual, and they are divided in thematic sections. The sections include ready lesson plans, which have learning goals and evaluation instructions. The final learning materials were published in August 2021, and they are freely available on the internet. Printed textbooks were sent to every school- and pre-school unit in Oulu and it is possible for other schools or municipalities to order the printed versions too.

Supporting learning materials, two cartoons, Secret and Elina's Diary were also created. The form of cartoon was selected as it is familiar and inviting to children. The cartoons were tested in groups of children, boys and girls, in order to check the credibility. The language of the cartoon "Elina's Diary" was modified by teens and the story was reviewed by the experts of sexual counselling. These materials included information and discussion instructions for teachers and parents. They can be found from the [www.turvataitokasvatus.fi](http://www.turvataitokasvatus.fi) webpage.

The pilot unit teachers described the learning materials in the interviews as comprehensive and useful. Also, other municipalities or schools outside of Oulu have been interested in the materials and have described them up to date.

### The role of parents

The Lanzarote Convention, the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, WHO standards and also the national action plan for the prevention of Violence against children bring up the role of parents. The action plan states that easy access to support for parenting and resource building, combined with help and support tailored to meet the specific needs of families reduces the risk of violence and neglect. The action plan emphasises that safety skills education should engage parents in learning and in teaching the child e.g., through shared homework, and that the parents should have safety skills material that is appropriate to the child's age, in the common language that is used by the parent and the child. The importance of discussions between the parent and the child is emphasised and the needs of different groups e.g., families with special needs children and families with different cultural backgrounds are mentioned. The action plan also brings up the need for a broader discussion: *"Integrating emotional and safety skills education into community events (such as parents' evenings and combined parent-child evenings) creates space for broader discussion and allows for a change in the values of the community, as well as enabling common agreements on children's curfews and digital media rules."* (Non-Violent Childhoods : Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020-2025, 27, 174-175)

The Safe Oulu project has taken into account the role of parents from early on. Parental organisations have been heard in creating the contents of the project and to keep the parents informed, the project has created handouts about the safety skills education to be shared at schools and primary schools. The project has organised parent's evenings or other events for parents and participated the evenings organised by schools. The contents have included also short info events about different social medias used by the children and youth. By now the project has reached over 2000 parents in these events. Feedback has been collected and it has been positive e.g., feedback from a parent's event about the threats of digital age and how to protect children from the threats showed that all apart one of the anonymous answerers planned to use the knowledge they gained (one maybe answer). The parents told that they will use what they have learned as follows:

*"By discussing about the safe use of internet (i.a. taking/sending/sharing pictures) online bullying and sexual harassment with the children."*

*"I will discuss regularly with the children what they are doing with the phone (other things than playing games) i.e., what they are talking about in whatsapp and I will encourage them to tell an adult if there is some behaviour that is disturbing or strange"*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Translations from the original feedback in Finnish.

When looking at the feedback it seems that the answers are in line with the objectives of fostering the open discussion between the parents and children, which is the best safety skill the children can have.

The created learning materials include homework which are done together with the parents. The cartoon "Secret" that was created in the project and shared to all children of Oulu on the grade 4 included an info letter for the parents with knowledge on grooming and instructions for discussions with the child and instructions for the situations when a child tells about incidents of grooming. Podcast with experts have also been recorded to provide information on topical subjects. During the spring 2022 exercise book for children and parents about safety skills (including information for parents) and an animation on digital safety skills are being developed. The web page [www.turvataitokasvatus.fi](http://www.turvataitokasvatus.fi) is developed with the aim of it to become the place of information for all. It will include a section for parents with knowledge and materials to be used with children and youth.

Multiculturalism and the need for materials on plain language have been noticed. Two programmes to be used with immigrant and/or refugee families and families with need of counselling on family communication have been developed, including themes of safety skills education. The materials that have been developed during the spring 2022 to support the role of parents in safety skill education, the exercise book and animation video, are translated into multiple languages. These materials in multiple languages serve parents and other in need of information multichannel. The animation will be especially useful for those audiences to whom reading is not a preferred method of receiving information e.g., because of lack of literacy.

## Children and the safety skills education in Oulu

As the Children's rights documents state, it is the fundamental right of children and young people to be recognised and heard in any matters affecting them. (Non-Violent Childhoods: Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020-2025, 27) As depicted earlier in this document, children have been involved in the development process of the Safe Oulu project. Their experiences and opinions have been collected when the pilots were running, and materials were developed.

As it was earlier told, teachers of the pilot units were interviewed in the spring 2021. During the interviews the teachers were asked to estimate how the children reacted to the safety skills education and also estimations on possible behavioural changes were enquired.

The pre-school teachers and teacher of the lower levels of basic education, classes 1.-6., had more possibilities to monitor children and the group dynamics as they teach the same children throughout the year. The teachers of the older children from classes 7. to 9. are subject teachers, e.g., math teachers or biology teachers who teach multiple groups every day and to whom following one class of children closely is not possible. In this teacher group, the COVID 19 situation with distant teaching made it more difficult to follow children's everyday activities. Thus, they were not able to verbalise changes in the scale that the teachers of younger children were.

The teachers of younger children told that children were enthusiastic to participate the safety skills education lessons. Many teachers told that children discussed the issues actively and shared their own experiences. This type of experience sharing is valuable, and it tells that the subjects of the lessons are already part of children's everyday life.

The pre-school teachers told e.g. that the children had used the names of body parts or other body-vocabulary less in a repetitive and derisive manner. The words became normal words, not something one can use to irritate or bully others. The teachers also told that children had changed the ways they touch each other. They had returned in everyday situations, e.g., when someone wanted to hug other child, to the lessons learned earlier and discussed how and when one can touch a friend as we all have different preferences regarding touches. The

children had also reminded their friends or someone who had touched them in a way that they did not like that it is not OK to touch like that or they had reminded them of the swimsuit -rule (under the swimsuit are the special and private areas, which no one can touch without a permission). Thus, the children were able to protect and defend the boundaries of themselves and others.

One pre-schoolteacher also described a change in one child who had formerly expressed feelings by hitting others or with other physical actions. The teacher told that during the year the child had learned to express feelings with words to the adults and the child also learned how to avoid situations which irritated the child.

The basic education class teachers had many notions connected to digital environments. One teacher told that the children asked for help in setting the safety-settings in social media more or they asked if something was OK in social media more easily. Teachers also told that they were able to discuss the problems the class had in social media, e.g. WhatsApp groups or discussion, on the digital safety lessons. Or they had found out that there were problems in these groups during the safety skills education. These problems were solved with the help of safety skills education. Teachers also mentioned that children had become more capable in conflict solving and compromising during the year.

As was earlier depicted, the subject teachers were not able to follow the every-day life of their pupils in a same manner that the other teachers. But the subject teachers told that the pupils had participated the discussions and even though the teachers had expected them to fool around during the classes, the pupils had taken part in a serious manner. Especially positively the teachers described classes that the older tutor students held for the smaller pupils. They told that the younger children admired the older and the older were able to share their experiences of social media usage, which made the message more easy to digest. For the older students these lessons had been a moment to stop and think about the social media rules so that they were able to teach these to the younger children. And the lessons also were a moment for them to feel inclusion and participation.

## Starting a major social transformation: How the long-term effects of Safe Oulu project are secured and followed

The Safe Oulu project has secured the success and continuum of the work on a structural level in several ways:

- The obligation to give safety skills education in pre-schools and basic education has been added to the core curriculums of Oulu. These changes include learning goals. The core curriculums guide the work of schools and pre-schools in Oulu and the changes also fulfil the demands of the national core curriculum for basic education.
- The Finnish Basic Education Act demands that there is a plan on protecting pupils from bullying, harassment, and violence in each municipality. The project has managed to include safety skills education as a part of this co-created plan in Oulu, which will commit the city of Oulu to continue the safety skills education after the project ends.
- Guide of "Psycho-social support" ("Practical instructions for professionals working in the educational sector for the situations when sexual abuse, harassment and grooming of children are revealed") and "Crisis management manual" for schools were created in order to help the professionals act properly when a crisis emerges.
- Each basic education unit has selected 1-2 teachers, who are in charge of the safety skills education in their school. The selected teachers have been educated by the project on the task. This task has been



added to the work complexity assessment system of the city of Oulu and thus the change guarantees each selected teacher an additional fee while they have this responsibility.

- Teachers and other professionals have been educated on safety skills education and they have learning materials with learning goals and ready lesson plans they can use.
- The project has collected a list of safety skills educators, consisting of national experts the project has used and local teachers who have been educated on the subject by the project. The list will be published on the [turvataitokasvatus.fi](http://turvataitokasvatus.fi) -net page. These safety skills educators can be booked by schools or municipalities when (re)education on the subject is needed. E.g. when other municipalities launch same type of projects or when a school in Oulu needs re-education on the subject after staff changes.

The safety skills education aims for a major social transformation and a child doesn't finish safety skills education but moves on to the next level according to his/her developmental level. The safety skills education has begun in all schools and pre-schools of Oulu previous fall, at the beginning of school year 2021-2022. Therefore, long-term research is needed in order to detect changes. Thus e.g. [the police statistics](#) of Oulu on child sexual abuse have been and will be followed. As sexual violence against children is mostly a hidden crime the indicators of [School Health Promotion study](#) on sexual violence and harassment against children offer much needed information on the scale and trend of the subject in Oulu. The SHP study is carried out nationwide every second year.

But as [research shows](#) that the students who didn't participate in child sexual abuse prevention programs were significantly more likely to be abused than those who did, the project has all the reasons to expect good long-term results.

## Co-operation makes us stronger

The Safe Oulu project has aimed to protect children of Oulu from sexual abuse and harassment both online and physical world. But cybercrimes know no boundaries. A child from Oulu might be abused by a perpetrator from Helsinki, Ljubljana or Madrid. And other way around. One child might be revictimized again and again as pictures or videos are shared online. As the phenomenon is cross-border by nature, Safe Oulu project has from the early on selected a path of open communication and information sharing. The project staff is working on sharing the information about the free learning materials and good practices in Finland and we hope to share our results for a wider audience beyond our country borders too.

Our contact information can be found on our webpage: [www.turvataitokasvatus.fi](http://www.turvataitokasvatus.fi)

**Feel free to contact us!**



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