Dear Parents and Carers

Children today live in a world where they hear and see more than they should, and experience more than they would want to. The cartoon *Secret* provides you an opportunity to talk with your children about the social safety skills they will need with digital media: how to protect privacy or share photos, and safety guidelines for threatening situations.

The cartoon tells an age-appropriate story about luring children online in order to engage in sexual activity with them (i.e. grooming). The target of the cartoon is to encourage children's intuition and judgment when interacting in digital media, and also boost adults' abilities to support their children's growth and development in such situations.

Turvallinen Oulu – Safe Oulu Project, Culture Power Station's Art to Jobs Project and Zonta Clubs in Oulu joined forces to produce the cartoon for educational purposes for 3rd to 6th grades as well as for support to parents in their task of bringing up children. Oulu Police Department, in cooperation with the CSE Team of the National Bureau of Investigation, participated in this cartoon project, too.

Home assignment

Read the cartoon together with your child. Talk about the cartoon and discuss not only the advice given in the cartoon, but also, when and where to act on the advice in real life.

The best safety skill for children is to have a family they can trust and talk openly with.

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According to surveys, the years from 9 to 12 are significant in connection to online risk behaviours. Children and adolescents have not yet developed the ability to recognise situations, where an adult may ask them, for instance, for photographic material with an intention to exploit it. They need adult guidance and life experience. (Livingstone et al. 2012).

Unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment with bullying in digital media is a common experience with children. According to the 2021 School Health Promotion study, 42 % of the girls and 8,6 % of the boys in 8th and 9th grade had been harassed on the phone or Internet during the 12-month period preceding the survey. 10,1% of the girls and 6,3% of the boys in grades 4. ad 5. had had experienced sexual toned comments, suggestions, or messages or had been shown sexual toned pictures during the 12-month period preceding the survey. (School Health Promotion Study 2022). More than 30% has witnessed sexual harassment carried out in digital media by other children during the 12-month period preceding the survey. (Laitinen et al. 2018.)

Online exploitation and out-of-control spread of selfies, whether commonplace or sexually explicit, is one of the risks linked with the use of digital media. The Internet Hotline of Save the Children is part of the international INHOPE network of hotlines, which investigates and checks online material of sexual abuse of children. The figures from 2019 statistics show that 65% of the children in these pictures are aged between 3 and 13 years. Many of the photos show a normal home setting on the background. (Pelastakaa Lapset ry. – Save the Children 2019).

Often children do not tell an adult about their experience because they are apprehensive of the consequences. According to the latest doctoral research, online restrictions are not a solution to decrease grooming on the Internet. It is vitally important to increase awareness and teach children from early on to make responsible decisions. The window for police or, for instance, parental intervention is very short. The first five days are the most crucial. (Nikolovska, M. 2020).

Grooming is **solicitation of children for sexual purposes**

- Groomer contacts children either by using digital media or in real life.
- Grooming can happen quickly. The groomer might try to get the child act spontaneously.
- Grooming can be a slow- moving process where the groomer tries to establish a trusting relationship with the child before including sexually explicit content into the conversation.
- Groomer can lure several children at the same time, especially online.
- Groomer tries to respond to the possible needs of the victim, pretending to be his or her friend. Groomer can also use gifts and "favours"
- Getting out of the situation may be challenging for the child. The child may feel ashamed and confused about what has happened and thus does not tell about it to adults
- Children often blame themselves for what happened and think it is partly, or entirely, their fault. They are ashamed of what they did or of their inability to defend themselves. The feeling of guilt and /or fear of consequences stops them from telling anyone. However, the child is never guilty when he/she has been groomed or when he/she has been the victim of sexual violence.
- The perpetrator may try to intimidate the child into keeping the secret by threats and extortion.

If a child tells you about his or her experience

- **Try to keep calm, do not put blame on him/her.** When it is your child, it can be difficult to hold your emotions in check. Try not to ask Why questions. Children often blame themselves and think "Why was I so stupid!" However, the adult is always the one with full responsibility. An adult can take the edge off the child's feelings of guilt and inferiority by telling him or her that a child cannot possibly know everything, none of what happened is the child's fault, and that an adult always has the sole responsibility.
- **Listen and support, do not leave the child alone with his or her thoughts and emotions.** Believe the child and what he or she says. Listen more - and speak less. Talk together with the child about what could be done and how to avoid further incidents. Remember to let the child know he or she has done the right thing by telling you and not keeping to him- or herself.
- **Act on the advice on page 16 of the cartoon.**

How to safeguard your child?

- **Share the day-to-day digital routines**. Talk about the Internet, games and other media with your children regularly as you would about any other thing in your everyday life. Start with interesting things, for instance by asking what cool things they have done with their phone that day and who they have been talking to. After that it would be easy to ask if anything made them uncomfortable or if they had contact with someone they have never met before
- **Protect privacy**. Tips on protecting your privacy on page 14 of the cartoon. Parents should be aware of the apps where children can be contacted online. In addition to TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and other apps in the social media, also many online games have a chat option.
- **Talk about the negative side of the Internet and harmful content in advance.** Explain to your children that sometimes also unpleasant things may take place in the social media. Let them know they can talk to you also about uncomfortable and disturbing things.
- **Teach them online safety**. Advice on how to tackle enticement, bullying and harassment on page 16 of the cartoon.
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Help and support

- Pupil welfare staff in your school
- Social and Crisis Emergency Services, tel. 044-7036235
- Psychiatric Team for Children and Adolescents, tel. 044 703 5919
- Social Welfare and Healthcare Services, e.g. Child Guidance and Family Counselling Centre
- Oulu Crisis Centre, mielenterveysseurat.fi/oulu/tukeajaapua/ p. 044 3690 500
- Victim Support Finland (RIKU), tel.116006; riku.fi/nuoret (chat)
- Virtual police officer, poliisi.fi/some
- Helpline for Children and Adolescents, tel. 116 111

The main target of the Turvallinen Oulu - Safe Oulu Project of the City of Oulu has been to prevent sexual crimes against minors. The primary goal of the procedures funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education is to promote social safety skills education, including prevention of enticement and abuse in digital media. The cartoon supports curricular Safety Skills Education. Further information and materials for parents at www.turvataitokasvatus.fi

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