

EDUCATING EXPERTS. TRAIN-THE-TRAINER APPROACH IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM TO PREVENT ONLINE ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

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Abstract

In the contemporary digital era, children are more exposed to online platforms than ever before, increasing their vulnerability to various forms of abuse and exploitation. The challenges posed by online exploitation and abuse are profound and complex, demanding comprehensive and holistic solutions. One of the promising strategies that has emerged within the school system is the "Train the Trainer" approach, aiming to capacitate teachers and school staff with the necessary skills to educate children about online safety. By equipping educators with specialized knowledge and skills, a safer learning environment can be created that fosters the holistic development of students.

This article aims to elucidate the Train-the-Trainer approach as a comprehensive solution to empower educators to recognize, address, and ultimately prevent abuse and exploitation. Furthermore, it will present the case of a project funded by the European Commission, which successfully addresses the problematic areas through trainings and education.

Keywords: *education, child exploitation, child abuse, abuse prevention, training the trainer, teachers' education*

1. INTRODUCTION

One in three people using the Internet worldwide are youngsters, and one in three internet users is a child under 18 years of age, according to UNICEF's 2019 "Growing up in a connected world" report. Since internet content can be concealed or withdrawn but frequently not destroyed, it is challenging to estimate the frequency of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) offences. However, with the aid of quick technology improvements, there is a discernible rise in the number of recorded occurrences of sexually abusing or exploiting minors worldwide. In addition, as reported by law enforcement authorities, child helplines, and internet reporting mechanisms, these numbers have increased even more during the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic. The preventative measures, such as travel limits, kept offenders from physically harming children, changing the nature of the crime to internet sexual abuse, according to a report by EUROPOL(2020). Even while parents might have been at home, they were likely preoccupied with their own jobs and were unlikely to exercise the necessary supervision over children's online activities due to the pandemic and remote learning processes that have been implemented throughout the EU. As a result, children spent and continue spending significantly more time online. The continually evolving risks and communication channels present a problem for law enforcement, ICT businesses, reporting platforms, and child protection organizations in their fight against offenders.

The bulk of online child sex incidents go unreported despite all efforts. To analyze one million items demonstrating child sexual abuse and exploitation, ECPAT, UNICEF and INTERPOL performed a joint study (2022). According to gender analysis, girls made up 64.8% of the casualties while boys made up 30.5%. However, when boys were involved, the violence and/or paraphilic aspects in the abuse were far more extreme. In addition, the percentage of males depicted in reported CSAM has noticeably increased from 4.3% in 2017 to 16.8% in 2018.8 Some cultural perspectives also promote the idea that boys are less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, making it more likely that such incidents will go unreported. Due to the boys' underreporting of these kinds of messaging, the chance of boys becoming victims is also underrepresented in some research. The fact that they could encounter more stigma than females when discussing their experiences contributes to the underreporting even more. They are a sizable

portion of the victims of both offline and online sexual assault, and when utilizing sexual imagery, offenders typically have greater success trying to begin sexual contacts with boys than with girls.

More chances for perpetrators to access and "groom" kids are made possible by the rise in social media use, online gaming, and child-focused online venues. Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech (2013) define online grooming as the act of establishing an emotional connection with a child to gain the child's trust for the purposes of sexual abuse, exploitation, or trafficking. A claim has been made that those who have a sexual interest in minors may be drawn to immersive computer games that give players sensation. The statistics on gaming in this context show significant gender gaps, and the gap widens as children get older. In comparison to boys their age (12–15), girls play video games for about 9 hours a week. Furthermore, the chat features in the games are utilized by 38% of players aged 8 to 11 and 58% of players aged 12 to 15. While only 16% of girls the same age are likely to communicate with strangers, 30% of boys the same age are likely to do so.

Enhancing the abilities and understanding of kids, teens, parents, guardians, and instructors about the responsible and safe use of ICTs, lowers the chance of getting caught up in risky circumstances and aids kids in making more informed decisions when they spend time online.

2. THE PROBLEM

The safety and well-being of students within and outside the school system are of paramount concern. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services focuses on children's welfare as essential legal, social, and organizational framework, designed to ensure that children are safe, healthy, and economically secure by developing a *A Guide for Health-Care Providers*.

Schools are meant to be sanctuaries of learning and personal growth, yet instances of abuse and exploitation outside of the school environment cast a dark cloud over education noble purpose. While preventive measures exist, they often fall short in addressing the intricate nature of these issues. The Train-the-Trainer approach emerges as an established and proactive strategy that holds the potential to transform the landscape of student protection.

The prevalence of abuse and online exploitation within and outside educational institutions has far-reaching consequences, affecting students' physical, emotional, and psychological development. The inadequacy of existing preventive mechanisms underscores the need for a holistic and robust approach. As mentioned, the Train-the-Trainer approach serves as a comprehensive solution to enable educators to recognize, address, and ultimately prevent abuse and exploitation. Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell (2011) refer to online exploitation as use of the internet to commit child exploitation crimes, including soliciting children for sexual purposes or persuading children to share sexually explicit images of themselves.

This article seeks to explore and expound upon the Train-the-Trainer approach as a viable strategy to combat abuse and exploitation within the school system. By delving into the intricacies of its components, ethical considerations, challenges, and real-world applications, we aim to advocate for the adoption of this approach and provide a roadmap for its successful implementation. The ultimate goal is to create an educational environment, where every child's safety and well-being are prioritized.

2.1. Recognizing online abuse and exploitation

The repercussions of abuse and exploitation are profound and multifaceted, extending beyond immediate physical harm. Victims often experience long-lasting emotional trauma, impaired academic performance, deteriorated self-esteem, and disrupted social relationships. The negative impact can impede students' holistic development, hindering their ability to thrive both within and beyond the educational sphere.

According to Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2006) online abuse is any type of abuse that occurs on the internet, often committed through social networks. It includes cyberbullying, harassment, stalking, and spreading hate or incitement. Furthermore, Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, (2008) define cyberbullying is

the use of digital communication tools (such as the internet and mobile phones) to make another person feel angry, sad, or scared, usually again and again.

Online abuse and exploitation outside the school system manifest in various forms, each leaving lasting scars on the victims. These forms include physical abuse, emotional manipulation, sexual exploitation, neglect, and even online harassment. Recognizing and addressing these diverse manifestations require a nuanced understanding of the intricate dynamics between educators, students, and their interactions.

Educators must be equipped with the tools to identify subtle warning signs indicative of abuse or exploitation. These signs may manifest as sudden changes in behaviour, academic decline, withdrawal, aggression, depression, or anxiety. By training educators to recognize these indicators, the Train-the-Trainer approach empowers them to intervene proactively, potentially averting harm and providing necessary support to affected students.

3. THE TRAIN-THE-TRAINER APPROACH: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Laird, Naquin and Holton (2003) explain the Train-the-Trainer as an educational model, where individuals identified as subject-matter experts are provided with the skills and knowledge necessary to train others in a specific field or subject area.

The Train-the-Trainer approach is a transformative strategy that revolves around the identification and training of a select group of educators, social workers, and counsellors. These individuals, often referred to as "trainers," receive specialized education and training in recognizing, addressing, and preventing abuse and exploitation. The core premise of this approach lies in the cascading effect of knowledge dissemination, wherein these trained individuals become advocates who educate and empower their peers within the educational ecosystem.

The "Train the Trainer" approach refers to the systematic process of training selected educators and support staff, empowering them to subsequently train others within their educational environment. This method not only ensures that the information and techniques are accurately conveyed but also provides a cost-effective, sustainable way to promote online safety education.

Educators occupy a unique and influential position in the lives of students. Their roles extend beyond academic instruction; educators are mentors, role models, and caregivers. Harnessing their influence and expertise to address abuse and exploitation aligns with their broader responsibilities. By educating educators, a web of interconnected individuals is created who collectively contribute to a safer and more secure learning environment.

3.1. Key Components of the Approach

The Train-the-Trainer approach comprises several interlinked components that together form a comprehensive framework for preventing abuse and exploitation. These components include the careful selection and training of trainers, the development of a multidisciplinary curriculum, the establishment of collaborative networks among trainers, and creation of monitoring and evaluation criteria. Each component contributes to the effectiveness and sustainability of the approach, fostering a culture of vigilance and safeguarding within educational institutions.

3.1.1. Selecting and Training the Trainers

The success of the Train-the-Trainer approach hinges on the meticulous selection of trainers who possess a genuine commitment to child safety and well-being. The selection of trainers begins by identifying individuals with the ability and willingness to participate as trainers. These may include teachers, counsellors, or other school staff with a specific interest in child welfare and technology. These trainers undergo a comprehensive training regimen that encompasses multiple dimensions. They delve into the legal aspects surrounding abuse and exploitation, delve into the psychology of victims and perpetrators, learn effective communication strategies, and explore ethical considerations in reporting and intervention.

3.1.2. Building a Multidisciplinary Curriculum

Central to the Train-the-Trainer approach is the development of a curriculum that encapsulates the diverse facets of abuse and exploitation prevention. Trainers collaborate to create a multidisciplinary curriculum that incorporates elements of child psychology, trauma-informed care, crisis management, communication skills, and cultural sensitivity. Creating a curriculum specifically designed to address the issues of online abuse and exploitation of children may include topics like cyberbullying, online grooming, privacy, and digital literacy. As per Gilster (1997) digital literacy refers to the ability to find, evaluate, utilize, share, and create content using information technologies and the internet. Such curriculum equips trainers with the knowledge required to educate and empower educators effectively.

3.1.3. Fostering Collaboration Among Trainers

The journey of a trainer is one of continuous learning. Trainers engage in ongoing professional development to stay abreast of the latest research, legal developments, and innovative strategies in abuse and exploitation prevention. Workshops, seminars, and conferences provide opportunities for trainers to refine their expertise and share insights with peers.

The collective wisdom and experience of trainers are harnessed through ongoing collaboration. Regular workshops, peer reviews, and collaborative problem-solving sessions facilitate the exchange of insights and best practices. The ongoing support could be in the form of offering continuous support to the trained trainers through regular workshops, webinars, and resource materials, thus ensuring the consistent evolution of knowledge and best practices. By fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility among trainers, the approach ensures that they remain updated on emerging challenges, innovative techniques, and evolving legal frameworks.

3.1.4. Monitoring and Evaluation

As a final step, The Train-the-Trainer approach embraces a culture of assessment and improvement. It is crucial to implement a comprehensive evaluation system to assess the impact of the training, its effectiveness in changing behaviours, and the continuous improvement of the program. Periodic evaluations measure the effectiveness of the approach, identifying strengths and areas for enhancement. Feedback from trainers, educators, and students informs adjustments, ensuring that the approach remains responsive to evolving challenges and best practices.

4. EMPOWERING EDUCATORS: KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL ENHANCEMENT

Educators embarking on the Train-the-Trainer journey delve into the intricacies of child development, understanding the evolving cognitive, emotional, and social stages of students. This knowledge enables educators to differentiate between age-appropriate behaviours and potential red flags that may indicate online abuse or online sexual exploitation.

Effective communication is a cornerstone of abuse and exploitation prevention. Educators learn to communicate empathetically and transparently, creating an environment where students feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Active listening skills empower educators to detect subtle cues that might otherwise go unnoticed, facilitating early intervention.

Trust is the foundation of any meaningful educator-student relationship. Through the Train-the-Trainer approach, educators acquire techniques to establish and nurture trusting relationships with their students. These relationships serve as conduits for open dialogue and enable students to confide in educators about their experiences, thereby facilitating timely intervention.

In addition, educators are educated on the importance of reporting suspected cases of abuse or exploitation promptly and following established protocols. Trainers guide educators through the intricacies of reporting, ensuring that they are equipped with the knowledge and confidence to navigate potentially challenging situations while prioritizing the safety and well-being of students.

4.1. Impact on Schools and Communities

The widespread implementation of the "Train the Trainer" approach within schools can have several beneficial impacts:

- Increased awareness and understanding. By educating teachers and staff, who, in turn, educate children, there is a cascading effect that permeates the entire school community, fostering a more informed and protected environment;
- Behavioural change: through ongoing engagement and learning, children's online habits may evolve, leading to safer online practices and reduced risk of exploitation;
- Community involvement: this approach encourages the involvement of parents and the broader community, creating a holistic protective network around the children.

5. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Despite its promise, the "Train the Trainer" approach also faces challenges such as resource constraints, resistance to new teaching methodologies, and the dynamic nature of online threats. Future strategies should focus on continuous curriculum development, international collaboration, and the integration of training into standard professional development for educators.

The Train-the-Trainer approach necessitates a commitment to ethical considerations, ensuring that trainers possess the requisite competence, empathy, and accountability. Mechanisms for ongoing assessment and peer review uphold the integrity of the approach, safeguarding against potential conflicts of interest or lapses in judgment.

5.1. Balancing Empowerment and Control

The delicate balance between empowering educators to intervene and adhering to established reporting protocols requires careful navigation. Trainers play a crucial role in imparting the significance of responsible intervention while respecting the boundaries that safeguard students' rights and well-being.

Educators trained through the Train-the-Trainer approach play a pivotal role in fostering safe and inclusive learning environments. By implementing strategies such as clear behavioural expectations, anti-bullying initiatives, and awareness campaigns, educators create an atmosphere where students feel valued, respected, and protected.

5.2. Addressing resistance and cultural sensitivity

Challenges may arise, stemming from resistance to change, cultural differences, or misconceptions about educators' roles in abuse prevention. Trainers should be equipped to address these challenges with cultural sensitivity, empathy, and a commitment to fostering an environment where every student's safety is paramount.

Celebrating instances where the Train-the-Trainer approach has led to prevention or intervention could serve as a motivating force. Success stories serve as beacons of hope, illustrating the positive impact of the approach on students' lives. Additionally, addressing challenges openly and collaboratively fosters a culture of resilience and adaptability, ensuring that barriers are overcome collectively.

5.3. Incorporating Prevention into Curriculum

Prevention should become a fundamental aspect of education through the integration of abuse and exploitation prevention modules into the curriculum. These modules cover topics such as personal safety, consent, responsible online behaviour, and recognizing unhealthy relationships. By infusing prevention education into academic subjects, educators ensure that students receive comprehensive and age-appropriate guidance.

5.4 Engaging Parents and Guardians

Educators extend their reach beyond the classroom, collaborating with parents and guardians to reinforce prevention strategies. Through workshops, informational sessions, and open communication, parents and guardians should become active partners in promoting student safety. This collaborative effort creates a unified front against abuse and exploitation, both within and outside the school environment.

5.5. Establishing Partnerships with External Agencies

The Train-the-Trainer approach extends its influence beyond the school's boundaries by fostering partnerships with external agencies. Collaboration with law enforcement, child protective services, mental health professionals, and community organizations enriches the support network available to students. This multidisciplinary approach ensures a holistic response to abuse and exploitation concerns.

The list of challenges and future considerations does not claim to be exhaustive, but may serve as a starting point or reminder when adopting the train-the-trainer approach.

6. CASE PRESENTATION: SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRAIN-THE-TRAINER APPROACH IN THE LEAGUE PROJECT

The Train-the-Trainer approach transcends geographical boundaries in this case study, showcasing a collaborative effort between multiple school districts. By pooling resources, expertise, and experiences, educators from diverse backgrounds united to establish a robust and interconnected web of prevention. The case study highlights the scalability and adaptability of the approach, emphasizing the potential for nationwide impact.

The LEAGUE project (Limiting Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Gender Based on Underage Boys by Educating Experts) focuses on the prevention and reporting of online sexual abuse of boys, improving the support provided to them, and enhancing the competences of the responsible authorities in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic changes.

Among the goals of the project are:

- To carry out international trainings that will enhance the capacity of the relevant actors and upgrade their knowledge on online child sexual abuse with the COVID-19 pandemic changes, and to carry out national trainings that will improve the knowledge and competences of teachers and parents on preventing and reporting online child sexual abuse using behavioural science;
- To design a platform in a child-friendly manner and with the participation of the children (mainly boys) themselves, to develop, test, and validate the platform, to disseminate the platform amongst the children;
- To create a chatbot that has the ability to provide information to children regarding online child sexual abuse;
- To disseminate project outputs through various platforms and networks to relevant stakeholders in order to increase the overall awareness on the project, and to enhance the prevention and reporting of online child sexual abuse cases of specifically underaged boys.

The LEAGUE project (www.project-league.eu) focuses on two key groups: 1) boys between the ages of 10 and 18; and 2) responsible actors for preventing and reporting online child sexual abuse with a focus on underage males. The LEAGUE project supports training initiatives both domestically and internationally. The envisaged international trainings with practitioners concentrate on the current environment and increased hazards brought about by COVID-19, and are intended to improve practitioners' overall competencies in preventing and identifying online sexual abuse. Parents, teachers, and school psychologists are the main targets of the national trainings. The trainings' behavioural science emphasis helps participants recognize, stop, and appropriately respond to online sexual assault.

The developed chatbot and the internet platform will be used to target boys between the ages of 10 to 18 years old. Both are created with the intended audience in mind. Peer-to-peer support, alternative psychological treatment, hotline information, and a course on children's rights presented in an approachable and kid-friendly way are among the platform's capabilities. The chatbot answers many questions that the target audience might have in plain English. Additionally, it lists phone numbers for hotlines and relevant authorities.

The training materials present general information about Online Child Sex Abuse (OCSA) and focus on identification mechanisms, preventive measures and support strategies related to OCSA. The training materials are addressed at psychologists, carers, social workers, law enforcement and other relevant actors that will be involved in the International Trainings; and to teachers, school psychologists, parents who take part in the National Trainings. The training materials are freely available on the project platform under the *Resources* section.

The LEAGUE project's implementation guarantees short-, mid-, and long-term results and impacts. By giving professionals and experts the knowledge they need, and enhancing their competencies in light of the changes brought about by the COVID-19 epidemic, LEAGUE increases their capacity short-term. Through the provision of an Internet platform for peer-to-peer support, alternative psychiatric assistance, and a course for children's rights in the context of online child sexual abuse, LEAGUE promotes the consolidation of the child protection community over the medium term. One of the primary target groups, boys aged 10 to 18, is impacted by the anticipated mid-term results. The project's actions will eventually lead to a more thorough strategy to stopping and reporting online sex abuse of boys between the ages of 10 and 18, in accordance to the EU Strategy on Children's Rights.

CONCLUSION

The "Train the Trainer" approach in the school system offers a multifaceted solution to the pressing concerns of online abuse and exploitation outside the school system, and provides a promising pathway to combat the online abuse and exploitation of children. By focusing on empowering educators to impart crucial online safety skills to students, by equipping them with specialized knowledge and skills, the approach creates a network of experts committed to student safety, and a sustainable and wide-reaching protective mechanism. Nevertheless, ongoing efforts are needed to overcome the associated challenges and to ensure that this approach adapts to the ever-changing landscape of digital threats and opportunities.

The imperative to adopt the Train-the-Trainer approach extends to educational stakeholders, policymakers, and society at large. It is a call to action to prioritize student safety, embrace innovative strategies, and commit to creating learning environments that nurture and protect.

As the Train-the-Trainer approach takes root and flourishes, we envision a future where abuse and exploitation are relegated to history. Educational institutions become havens of learning and personal growth, where educators stand as guardians of safety, empowerment, and positive change.

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