

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Responsible Reporting: Protecting  
Children from Revictimization



International Centre™  
FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

ICMEC envisions a world where children can grow up safe from exploitation, abuse, or the risk of going missing. We believe every child deserves a safe childhood.





**International Centre™**  
**FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN**

Words have power. Our words define, describe, and assign meaning to issues and events. The words we use are essential to expressing ourselves to others and fostering understanding. Using proper terminology when discussing child protection issues is especially critical. A common and appropriate vocabulary is necessary to frame violations against children as criminal acts, improve policy and legislation to better defend children, and avoid revictimization.

When these words are misused, not only does that impair our ability as professionals to prevent more children from experiencing harm, but it also retraumatizes survivors by taking away their power to be understood and believed.

**As a journalist, you play a critical role in reporting on the issue of child sexual abuse. Every time terms are used incorrectly, it takes power away from victims and forces them to continue to carry their burden alone.**

When discussing child sexual exploitation and abuse, make best effort to use language that describes an experience rather than assigning a trait or noun to a child's identity. The expression "children subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse" describes a situation in a more neutral fashion without labeling the child with a noun. At the same time, the term clearly denotes that the responsibility does not lie with the child but with the person who subjected the child to the exploitation or abuse.

**For more definitions, usages, and resources on responsible media reporting of child sexual abuse and exploitation, please visit:**

- International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children Online Glossary of Terms: [icmec.org/glossary](https://icmec.org/glossary)
- Luxembourg Guidelines: [luxembourgguidelines.org](https://luxembourgguidelines.org)
- Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's Terms and Phrases Relating to Child Sexual Abuse: [www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/1412/view/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-iicsa-vscp-terms-phrases.pdf](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/1412/view/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-iicsa-vscp-terms-phrases.pdf)
- CDC Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect: [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/childmaltreatment/journalists-guide.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/childmaltreatment/journalists-guide.pdf)
- NICCY's Guidance for Media Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect: [www.niccy.org/media/3273/media-guidance-reporting-child-abuse-neglect.pdf](https://www.niccy.org/media/3273/media-guidance-reporting-child-abuse-neglect.pdf)
- UNICEF Media Ethical Guidelines: [www.unicef.org/eca/media/ethical-guidelines](https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/ethical-guidelines)
- Media Wise: [www.mediawise.org.uk/children/](https://www.mediawise.org.uk/children/) Natalie Yahr, Mandatory Reporting: What Journalists Get Wrong When They Cover Child Abuse, and How to Get It Right: [ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2021/05/17/mandatoryreporting-what-journalists-get-wrong-when-they-cover-child-abuse-and-how-to-get-it-right/](https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2021/05/17/mandatoryreporting-what-journalists-get-wrong-when-they-cover-child-abuse-and-how-to-get-it-right/)

**Questions? Contact ICMEC's Communications team at [icmec.org/pressroom](https://icmec.org/pressroom)**

#### **CHILD:**

Every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child.

#### **CHILD VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION/ABUSE:**

In the context of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, the term “victim” is a crucial legal term that serves to define children who have been subjected to harmful and/or criminal acts as rights-holders and to avoid any form of responsibility or blame being placed on the child.

The term should be used in an objective manner to state the fact that the child has been subjected to or has experienced a harmful/criminal act and not be used to label the person as weak and/or helpless. Taking into account children’s unique needs and rights to protection, it is important to use an inclusive notion of the “child victim,” which encompasses not only acts directly aimed at the child but also acts that indirectly cause harm to her/him.

The term “survivor” is increasingly used in the child protection sector, either interchangeably or in combination with the term “victim,” to refer to persons who have suffered harm and victimization. Just as people (including children) may reject the term “victim” and see it as a label they do not identify with, the same could happen with the term “survivor.” Outside of the legal context, it is important never to label a person who does not want to be called a “victim” or “survivor.”

Reporters seeking to be extra cautious or sensitive can also use the terms “children subjected to sexual exploitation” or “children subjected to sexual abuse.”

#### **CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:**

UNHCR defines sexual abuse not only as violent sexual assault of children, but also other sexual activities, including inappropriate touching, where the child does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared. Child sexual abuse includes a range of other offenses, including grooming, viewing sexual abuse images, and encouraging children to act in sexually inappropriate ways. Both adults and minors can commit child sexual abuse, and it can occur online and offline.

#### **CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION:**

The sexual maltreatment of children where some form of remuneration may occur, which consists of, but is not limited to, child prostitution, early or forced marriage, sale of children, trafficking in children for sexual purposes, child sex tourism, child sexual abuse material, and child sexual performances. Commercial child sexual exploitation can occur online and offline. Recently, this term has become more interchangeable with child sexual exploitation.

#### **COMMERCIAL CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION:**

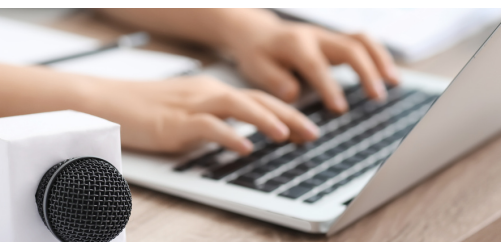
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#### **CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL (CSAM):**

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is any representation, by whatever means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes. The terms child pornography, child porn, kiddie porn, and the like should not be used as they do not accurately convey the nature and extent of the harm committed against the child and may imply that the child is complicit in the sexual abuse, thus detracting from the fact that the images are evidence of the commission of the crime of sexual assault and/or rape of a child. While the laws of many countries continue to use the term “child pornography,” there has been a global movement towards the use of the term “child sexual abuse material” (CSAM) to properly convey that sexualized material depicting or otherwise representing children is indeed a representation, and a form, of child sexual abuse.

#### **GROOMING**

Grooming is the process of establishing or building a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of the internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person. Although offline grooming still occurs, changes in the internet and technology coupled with the circumstances of the global pandemic, allowed for a significant increase in the online sexual grooming of children. Unfortunately, this means that more and more children are vulnerable to online grooming and the resulting online sexual abuse. For many of these children, the images and videos that are forcibly coerced from them by their groomer will continue to live on the internet. Every time one of those images is viewed or shared, the child is being revictimized.



Words have Power. No matter who you are or what you do, we all have a part to play in creating a safer world for children. That can begin by using child protection terms correctly.

### **MISSING CHILD:**

What it means to be “missing” is defined differently around the world. While international legal instruments, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, provide a universal definition of “child,” there is no similar global consensus on how to define “missing child.” The International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children defines “missing child” as “any person under the age of 18 whose whereabouts are unknown.” However, since children are missing due to a variety of circumstances, there are several distinct categories of missing child cases:

#### **ENDANGERED RUNAWAY:**

A child who is away from home without the permission of his or her parent(s) or legal guardian(s). The child may have voluntarily left home for a variety of reasons.

#### **FAMILY ABDUCTION:**

The taking, retention, or concealment of a child or children by a parent, another family member, custodian, or his or her agent, in derogation of the custody rights, including visitation rights, of another parent or family member.

#### **NON-FAMILY ABDUCTION:**

The coerced and unauthorized taking of a child by someone other than a family member.

#### **LOST, INJURED OR OTHERWISE MISSING:**

A child who has disappeared under unknown circumstances. Facts are insufficient to determine the cause of a child's disappearance.

#### **UNACCOMPANIED OR ABANDONED MINOR:**

A child, not accompanied by an adult legally responsible for him or her, including those traveling alone without custodial permission, those separated by an emergency, those in a refugee situation, and those who have been abandoned or otherwise left without any adult care.

### **TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN FOR SEXUAL PURPOSES:**

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs.

### **CHILD SEXUAL OFFENDER/ PERPETRATOR OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:**

“Offender” and “perpetrator” tend to be the most frequently used terms to refer to individuals having allegedly committed or been convicted of committing sexual offenses against children. In accordance with major dictionaries, the term “offender” takes on the principal meaning of a person who commits/ is guilty of a crime. The term “perpetrator” appears to take on a slightly broader meaning, referring to a person “who carries out a harmful, illegal, or immoral act,” as well as someone who has been convicted of committing such a crime or act. Reporters should never use the term “pedophile;” see explanation below. The term “sex offender” includes offenses involving both child victims as well as adult victims, thus introducing a much broader scope that goes beyond sexual offenses against children. On this basis, it is recommended that the terms “perpetrator of sexual crimes against children” or (if a shorter expression is needed) “perpetrator of child sex offenses” or “child sex offender” be used as the preferred terminology in the context of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

### **TERMS TO AVOID when discussing child sexual abuse, exploitation, and children who are missing:**

- Child Sex Tourist - Implies a level of consent that cannot exist with a minor.
- Child Pornography - The terms child pornography, child porn, kiddie porn, and the like should not be used as they do not accurately convey the nature and extent of the harm committed against the child and may imply that the child is complicit in the sexual abuse, detracting from the fact that the images are evidence of the commission of the crime of sexual assault and/or rape of a child.
- Child Prostitution - Implies a level of consent that cannot exist with a minor.
- Customer/Client/John - Implies a level of consent that cannot exist with a minor and ignores the fact that sexual solicitation of a child is a crime.
- Pedophile - The term pedophile refers to a medical diagnosis of a paraphilic disorder and is often used inappropriately to describe all perpetrators of child sexual abuse. This term applies to a person who has a primary or exclusive sexual preference for prepubescent children. Not all pedophiles act on their sexual preference or interest. Reporters should avoid using the term pedophile.