

# From Detection to Protection: Online Risks, Privacy and Security in the Lives of Disabilities

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## Abstract

*This paper emphasises the need to address online risks, privacy and security in the everyday digital lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. It proposes a study that will explore their online experiences alongside parental concerns, expectations and practices, as well as the forms of support teachers provide to both parents and students. The project will adopt a mixed-methods design, bringing together focus groups with young people with intellectual disabilities, online surveys with parents and semi-structured interviews with teachers. By integrating these perspectives, the paper aims to build an evidence base that can inform future research and guide the development of more context-sensitive policies, educational practices and curricula. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to safer and more inclusive online environments for young people with intellectual disabilities, without overlooking their agency and participation in digital spaces. It also highlights priority areas and questions for subsequent empirical and comparative investigations in education.*

## 1. Introduction

Privacy is widely acknowledged as a fundamental and inviolable human right that supports individuals' autonomy and protects their freedom [1]. Across religions, cultures and ethnicities, every person is recognised as having a legally protected right to privacy under international conventions [3]. This right implies that individuals retain control over who can access their personal information, and any unauthorised sharing or dissemination of such information constitutes a violation of their rights. The same protection extends to individuals with disabilities, whose right to privacy and dignity remains intact regardless of their impairment [4].

In contemporary life, online platforms have become embedded in everyday routines. Although

many of these platforms are free and easily accessible, they bring significant challenges and concerns in relation to privacy. People with intellectual disabilities can be especially vulnerable to online risks, as they may not always have the cognitive resources to foresee or manage potential threats [7]. These worries are intensified by broader social anxieties about sexual crimes, threats to social order, and perceived risks to family values and marriage as an institution. Exposure to sexual content on social media raises at least two key concerns: younger children may find it difficult to interpret explicit sexual scenes and experience emotional distress, while adolescents who encounter such material may be more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours. For some individuals, sexual acts are considered highly private, and their realistic portrayal in public media can be disturbing. Nevertheless, such media representations continue to attract substantial audiences, partly due to a "forbidden fruit" effect that heightens curiosity and interest in engagement [8]. UNICEF (2024) defines sexual violence against children as any intentional, unwanted and non-consensual sexual act or attempt, including non-contact forms such as online harassment or verbal abuse. Globally, an estimated 370 million girls and women have experienced contact sexual violence and 280 million have been exposed to non-contact sexual violence before age 18; in total, 650 million were subjected to sexual violence as children, roughly one in five [10]. Children with disabilities are disproportionately affected: one in three experiences neglect or sexual, physical or emotional abuse, those with multiple disabilities face face-to-face and online bullying at a rate of 47%, and overall, they are about twice as likely to experience violence as their non-disabled peers [11].

Abuse cuts across social class, nationality and belief systems; it constitutes a violation of human dignity, identity and privacy, with serious negative consequences not only for victims but also for

witnesses and wider communities. People with disabilities consistently stress that they should not be pressured or forced into sexual activity; for them, sexuality is framed in terms of equality and mutual respect rather than abuse [12]. Young people with intellectual disabilities who are exploring their sexuality can be at heightened risk of abuse and exploitation [9]. These risks are amplified by pervasive societal misconceptions, such as the false dichotomy that people with disabilities are either asexual or excessively sexual, which distorts how their needs and boundaries are perceived [1].

Beyond issues of privacy and sexual violence, the broader social implications are considerable. Humans are inherently social and seek recognition and acceptance through friendships; without such connections, life can become repetitive and isolating. Research suggests that individuals with wider social networks show greater resilience to illness, while separated and divorced people have higher mortality rates than those who are married. Social isolation is also associated with a two- to threefold increase in mortality risk compared to more socially active individuals. Building friendships is a demanding process that involves initiating, sustaining and deepening relationships, and these demands can be particularly challenging for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Even when physically present in social environments, they may find it difficult to engage in meaningful interaction [9]. Studies indicate that people with disabilities often spend their leisure time in more passive activities and participate less frequently in social activities than their non-disabled peers [13]. Common leisure pursuits include watching television or videos, listening to music and playing computer games. Responding to these concerns calls for a comprehensive approach, including stronger legal protections, increased awareness, and inclusive social policies and curricula that support the dignity, safety and well-being of all individuals.

## 2. Objectives

This paper underscores the significance of online privacy and security in the everyday digital lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities, with a particular focus on identifying gaps in the existing literature and proposing directions for future research. Against the backdrop of rapidly expanding digital platforms and services, it considers how opportunities for connection, learning and leisure are interwoven with heightened risks, especially when cognitive and communicative vulnerabilities are present. The study is guided by two main objectives:

- i. To emphasise the importance of online risks, privacy and security for individuals with

intellectual disabilities, and to map out areas where empirical and conceptual work remains limited, thereby offering recommendations for future research agendas.

- ii. To explore the online experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities, while also examining parental concerns and expectations and considering the forms of support teachers provide to both parents and students in navigating digital environments.

By addressing these objectives in an integrated way, the paper draws attention to a critical gap in the literature and seeks to generate insights that can orient subsequent studies and inform broader discussions on inclusive and rights-based approaches to online safety.

## 3. Methodology

This section will present a detailed account of the mixed-methods design that integrates the qualitative and quantitative components of the study, as well as the pragmatic paradigm that underpins this approach.

### 3.1. Pragmatic Paradigm and Mixed Methods

The concept of paradigm is used in educational research to describe a worldview or a set of beliefs that shapes how research is understood and interpreted. Paradigms influence what is studied, how it is studied, and how findings are made sense of. Scholars who argue that a single, paradigm-bound approach is insufficient advocate combining methods, or using mixed methods, in ways that are responsive to participants' actual behaviours, the beliefs underpinning those behaviours, and the possible consequences of different courses of action. Paradigms such as pragmatism explicitly foreground the potential of integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches where this is useful. From a pragmatic stance, multiple methods, different worldviews, assumptions, data collection tools and analytic strategies can be brought together within a single study [5, 6].

In this research, a mixed-methods approach is adopted that combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the problem under investigation. This design is grounded in the pragmatic paradigm, which values methodological pluralism and emphasises the integration of methods based on their practical utility in addressing complex social phenomena [6]. Pragmatism assumes that no single paradigm or method adequately captures multifaceted educational realities and therefore supports combining approaches that most effectively address the research questions.

Within this framework, the qualitative strand enables an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences and meanings related to online privacy and security, whereas the quantitative strand provides descriptive and correlational insights that help identify broader patterns among participants. The integration of these two strands is intended to yield a richer, more contextualised and balanced interpretation of the data, consistent with the pragmatic view that considerations of “what works” guide methodological choices rather than strict adherence to a single paradigm [7].

Accordingly, this study uses qualitative and quantitative data collection methods within a mixed-methods framework. These methods are designed to complement one another by providing both breadth and depth in examining parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of online privacy and security for young people with intellectual disabilities.

### 3.2. Quantitative Methodology

Quantitative research is commonly defined as a systematic and objective approach to studying phenomena through the collection and analysis of numerical data. It seeks to identify relationships, test hypotheses and describe patterns among measurable variables, producing findings that may be replicated and, to some extent, generalised across contexts. Quantitative designs are structured to gather data in a planned and orderly way to address specific research questions. Survey methods, for example, record participants’ responses within predefined categories and translate these into numerical form, enabling researchers to draw generalisable conclusions by applying statistical techniques [6]. Rooted in principles of objectivity, consistency and empirical verification, quantitative research rests on the assumption that aspects of reality can be measured and approximated through dependable instruments and controlled observation [7].

Within this broader philosophical landscape, the post-positivist paradigm offers the theoretical grounding for the quantitative strand of the present study. Post-positivism develops out of classical positivism yet rejects the idea of accessing absolute truth; instead, it recognises that human accounts of reality are always partial and open to error [7]. It maintains that knowledge is most robust when it is generated through empirical inquiry and critical scrutiny, while also acknowledging that complete objectivity is unattainable. The researcher therefore works from a position of cautious realism—aiming for accuracy through rigorous design, careful measurement and systematic validation, but accepting that conclusions are probabilistic rather than definitive [6].

In line with this paradigm, the study is designed to use an online questionnaire as a principal data collection tool. The adoption of a structured and standardised form reflects the post-positivist emphasis on observable indicators, systematic measurement and the possibility of replication [7]. This strategy allows for the collection of comparable data across participants and supports statistical analysis, thereby enabling the formulation of cautious, evidence-informed claims about parents’ perceptions and experiences concerning online privacy, safety and digital behaviours.

### 3.3. Recruitment and participants

Children's sexual activities can sometimes be risky, requiring collaboration between parents, educators, and medical professionals, alongside the need for supportive relationships amongst teachers, parents and school administrators. It is recommended that education systems should be flexible and child-centred, integrating appropriate assessments and adapting existing curricula for students with disabilities, rather than creating entirely new programs, while the effective collaboration described above can ensure parental involvement in decision-making and student support [1].

Given the significance of parental and teacher involvement in privacy education, this study proposes the inclusion of three participant groups: (a) teenagers with intellectual disabilities, (b) teachers, and (c) parents. Snowball and criterion sampling will be employed. The inclusion criteria are as follows:

- i. Being a young individual diagnosed with mild intellectual disability (aged 14–16),
- ii. Teaching a student with mild intellectual disability (aged 14–16) (for teachers),
- iii. Being a parent of a child with mild intellectual disability (aged 14–16) (for parents),
- iv. Providing voluntary participation consent.

Criterion sampling selects participants based on predefined criteria, while snowball sampling expands recruitment through participant referrals. Combining multiple sampling strategies can enhance the study’s validity and representativeness [15].

### 3.4. Ethics

Ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, securing ethics committee approval before data collection, maintaining transparency by using data solely for academic purposes, and respecting participants’ right to withdraw at any time. Additionally, privacy will be safeguarded through anonymisation and confidentiality measures.

### 3.5. Data collection

This study will adopt a multi-method data collection approach, incorporating focus group interviews with young people with mild intellectual disabilities (aged 14–16), semi-structured interviews with teachers, and surveys with parents.

The interview technique is a widely used qualitative method for exploring individuals' understandings, feelings, and experiences [16]. Interviews facilitate interactive discussions, allowing researchers to gain in-depth insights [17]. Firstly, focus group interviews will explore the online privacy and security perceptions of participants with mild intellectual disabilities, and their digital experiences. A flexible discussion guide will be used to ensure a supportive environment where participants can comfortably express their views. Ethical considerations will be strictly followed, with informed consent obtained from both participants and their parents. Secondly, semi-structured interviews with teachers will explore their perspectives on online privacy and security for young people with intellectual disabilities. The interview questions will be developed in alignment with the research objectives. Informed consent shall be obtained before the interviews, and a research journal will be maintained to document observations and reflections throughout the data collection process. Finally, surveys are a widely used data collection method for generalising findings from a sample to the broader population and an online survey will therefore be distributed to parents to investigate their perceptions of their children's online privacy and security [14]. The questionnaire will be carefully designed to align with the research objectives and contain clear, comprehensible questions. Parents will be informed that participation is voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly maintained. Responses will be collected within a specified timeframe to ensure data consistency. The findings from the survey will provide valuable insights into parental perspectives and contribute to addressing the research questions.

### 3.6. Data analysis

The validity and reliability of data collection tools will be ensured through rigorous analyses of pilot interviews, surveys, and interviews. In quantitative research, validity ensures that a research instrument accurately measures the intended concept, while reliability refers to the consistency and reproducibility of results [17]. A study is considered reliable if similar outcomes can be obtained under comparable conditions. Both validity and reliability are crucial for

maintaining research integrity in both quantitative and qualitative studies.

To enhance the validity and reliability of survey findings, a pilot study will be conducted to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the questionnaire. The pilot phase will involve approximately twenty-five individuals for the survey, permitting the refining of questions if needed, measuring of response times, and identification of any ambiguities or omissions. Any necessary revisions will be made to ensure that the instruments are clear, unbiased, and appropriate for the target population [14, 17].

The Likert rating scales type of survey questions directed to parents to investigate their perspectives on their children's online safety and privacy will ensure the consistent measurement of attitudes under standardised conditions [14]. The validity of the questionnaire can be assessed using the Content Index (CVI), while reliability can be determined Validity through internal consistency analysis via Cronbach's Alpha coefficient in SPSS [18]. Careful sample selection and statistical analysis are intended to strengthen the validity and reliability of quantitative data. Although perfect validity cannot be fully achieved, it can be maximised with rigorous methodology [17].

To ensure the reliability of the focus group and semi-structured interview data, non-verbal cues and triangulation methods will be included [16]. Additionally, inter-coder reliability and methodological triangulation can be applied to enhance the validity and consistency of findings [17].

## 4. Discussion

Sexuality has been, and remains, a prominent theme in books, magazines, newspapers, films, and television; sexual issues are frequently featured across media platforms, thereby shaping sexual topics, and influencing societal attitudes and perceptions [8]. Research suggests that magazines targeting young girls contribute to shaping their sexual attitudes. Similarly, sexually explicit content in films and television has raised widespread public concerns, as these media portray sexual behaviour more openly than in previous decades.

With the rise of digital media, sexually explicit content is increasingly accessible, particularly for young audiences. Images shared online can be copied, redistributed, and remain accessible after deletion, facilitating their rapid and uncontrollable spread [19]. Several television channels in North America and Europe (e.g. Playboy, Tuxedo, American Exxtasy, the UK's The Adult Channel) broadcast explicit sexual content to large audiences [8]. The widespread

availability of free, unregulated, and potentially illegal sexual content has heightened parental concerns, particularly regarding its accessibility to children and adolescents [20].

The rise of sexual content in digital spaces has intensified debates around sexuality, which carry not only moral but also social, psychological and cultural dimensions. From a mediatisation perspective, media are understood not simply as reflecting sexuality, but as reshaping its meaning by integrating it into everyday life. Young adults do not evaluate pornography in a uniform way; they express varied views on issues such as ease of access, discourses of addiction, styles of representation and the degree of realism. While some research links pornography uses with more permissive sexual attitudes, other studies point to methodological weaknesses and difficulties in establishing causal relationships. Consequently, rather than relying on broad claims that pornography is inherently harmful or inherently liberating, a more nuanced approach that considers context, audience characteristics and patterns of use appears necessary. For young people with intellectual disabilities, this may be particularly complex: while digital environments can create openings for social connection and belonging, they also present specific risks, including non-consensual image sharing, sextortion and deepfake-related abuse. In this context, it becomes important to consider media literacy perspectives that acknowledge young people's multiple positions—as potential perpetrators, victims or bystanders—alongside more protection-oriented frameworks [2].

This research aims to explore the online experiences of young people with intellectual disabilities through focus group discussions, identifying the risks they encounter and their awareness of online privacy and security. The study will provide insights into their understanding of digital safety, highlighting potential vulnerabilities. The findings are expected to contribute to developing strategies that enhance their ability to navigate the online environment securely and independently.

Sex education at an early age, and reinforced across multiple environments, implies that both parents and teachers are supported by professionals to ensure a comprehensive approach. Individuals with intellectual disabilities experience the same stages of sexual development as their typically developing peers and may have similar desires [1]. Developing tailored educational programmes based on the specific needs of individuals with disabilities can foster positive developmental outcomes across various aspects of their lives.

Families play a crucial role in monitoring and guiding their children's sexual development [1]. The

effectiveness of sexual education for individuals with disabilities largely depends on parental involvement; therefore, offering parents guidance and support is essential. Experts can engage in open communication with parents, provide tailored recommendations, and actively involve them in educational planning [5]. Parental perspectives may help in shaping effective interventions, and collaborative efforts can significantly contribute to the success of such initiatives. Beyond their educational role, parents are often the primary caregivers, assisting with medical, educational, and social transitions into adulthood [9]. However, some parents may avoid addressing sexual issues due to discomfort or lack of knowledge, inadvertently restricting their children's access to crucial information. Discussions on sexuality remain limited, and individuals with intellectual disabilities often face significant barriers to receiving appropriate sexual education. Additionally, societal reluctance to acknowledge the sexual rights and needs of individuals with disabilities further exacerbates these challenges. Addressing these gaps through inclusive, structured, and ongoing education can ensure the well-being and autonomy of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Studies on this subject reveal the inadequacy of curricula developed for individuals with intellectual disabilities and the views of teachers and parents on this issue. Academic studies on how the curriculum should be structured for students with intellectual disabilities point to the difficulties encountered in developing the educational and life skills of these individuals. However, the risks presented by online environments and the effects of social isolation on individuals with disabilities are an important area of research. Students with autism spectrum disorder and their families have emphasized that more precautions should be taken against cyberbullying and online threats. All these studies highlight the need for more comprehensive and effective policies and curricula regarding the safety, education, and social inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper highlights the need for further research on online security and privacy challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. Expanding empirical and conceptual work in this area can help to clarify how these challenges are experienced by young people themselves, as well as by their parents and teachers, across different digital contexts. Such studies may contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive policies, educational programmes and curricula that not only prioritise protection, but also support autonomy,

participation and digital citizenship. In this way, research in this field can respond to the growing need for protective measures while also promoting the rights, dignity and well-being of individuals with intellectual disabilities in an increasingly digital society.

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