

Combating online child sexual abuse in the United Kingdom and Italy: Multi-agency responses in prevention

Az online szexuális gyermekbántalmazás elleni küzdelem az Egyesült Királyságban és Olaszországban: Multiszektorális prevenciók válaszok

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Abstract

This article analyses responses to online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSA) through a comparative study of preventive measures in the UK and Italy. It examines the increasing prevalence of OCSA, exacerbated by digital connectivity and the Covid-19 pandemic. It also analyses the role of law enforcement and NGOs in preventive measures as well as the importance of parental involvement. The study mentions the role of social workers in early intervention, particularly educational programmes aimed at raising awareness, promoting personal boundaries and recognising warning signs. The findings demonstrate significant differences in legislative approaches: the UK adopts a more regulatory framework imposing obligations on online platforms while Italy relies more on a law enforcement intervention. By considering cultural and legal variations, the article identifies key challenges in addressing OCSA effectively and underscores the need for enhanced legal frameworks and increased public awareness to keep children safe online.

Keywords: online child abuse, prevention, law enforcement, role of NGOs

Absztrakt

A tanulmány a gyermekek online szexuális kizsákmányolására és bántalmazására (OCSA) adott válaszokat elemzi az Egyesült Királyság és Olaszország megelőző intézkedéseinek összehasonlító elemzésén keresztül. Vizsgálja az OCSA növekvő előfordulását, amelyet a digitális összekapcsoltság és a Covid-19 világjárvány súlyosbított. Kitér a bűnüldöző szervek és a civil szervezetek szerepére a megelőző intézkedésekben, és hangsúlyozza a szülők bevonásának fontosságát. A tanulmány a szociális munkások szerepét a korai intervenciókban látja, így különösen a probléma tudatosításában, a személyes határok megtartására nevelésben, és a figyelmeztető jelek felismerését célzó oktatási programokban. Az eredmények jelentős különbségeket mutatnak a jogalkotási megközelítésekben: az Egyesült Királyság egy inkább szabályozási keretet fogad el, amely kötelezettségeket ró az online platformokra, míg Olaszország

inkább a bűnüldözési beavatkozásokra támaszkodik. A kulturális és jogi különbségekre figyelemmel, a tanulmány rámutat az OCSA hatékony kezelésének főbb kihívásaira, és hangsúlyozza a jogi keretek megerősítésének szükségességét, valamint a fokozott társadalmi tudatosság szerepét a gyermekek online biztonságának megőrzésében.

Kulcsszavak: *online gyermekbántalmazás, prevenció, bűnüldözés, civil szervezetek szerepe*

Abbreviations

BASW: British Association of Social Workers
C.N.C.P.O.: National Centre for the Fight Against Paedophilia
CEOP: Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command
CPD: Continuing Professional Development
CSA: Child sexual abuse
CSAM: Child sexual abuse material
IWF: Internet Watch Foundation
NCA: National Crime Agency
NGOs: non-governmental organizations
NSPCC: The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
OCSA: Online child sexual abuse
OS.MO.CO.P: World Observatory Against Pedophilia
RSE: Relationships and sex education

Introduction

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a worldwide emerging societal issue. It refers to forced or enticed sexual activity with minors (including physical touching, watching sexual acts together), whether the child is aware of what is happening. Cyberbullying refers to the intentional and repeated use of digital technologies (including social networking sites such as Facebook, Tumblr or online gaming activities) to cause harassment, humiliation or otherwise psychological torment to the online victim (Peebles, 2014). On the other hand, Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA) regards sexual exploitation of minors via online platforms (which do not necessarily require physical contact with the victim). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2024), violence against children has always been a major concern for policymakers and activists. Historical evidence of mutilation, emotional and physical sexual abuse and other forms of child exploitation can be traced back to early civilization. However, today, child sexual abuse is seen as attaining epidemic proportions at the same time as it is rapidly moving online. This movement has two very important consequences. First, it makes reliable statistics difficult to obtain. The vast global recesses of the internet provide a hiding place beyond the reach of the criminal justice agencies, or any other body attempting to estimate the extent of the phenomenon. As the UK's leading NGO, The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), in January 2025 remarked, it is impossible to know the exact number of children who have experienced sexual abuses in the UK. Nevertheless, the NSPCC estimated, based on a 2011 survey of 2,275 young people that 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused (NSPCC, 2025).

Second, the shift to OCSA means that the organization of abuse transcends national boundaries. According to the Italian Meter association's report (Associazione Meter, 2023), the highest number worldwide of online child pornography domains (the 'licence plates' of

websites) are registered in the U.S. This is a fast-developing area. The move of abuse online has been facilitated by the rapid development of the internet. Global organizations create obstacles to traditional police methods of crime detection. Certainly, there have been some successes in international police operations, very much part of the response to cyber-crime and international organised crime. For instance, in 2025 ‘Operation Cumberland’ involved the EU police information agency Europol in supporting law enforcement authorities from 19 countries in a large-scale hit against sexual exploitation of minors. The suspects were members of an organized crime group involved in the dissemination of AI generated images of minors (Europol, 2025). Nevertheless, the obstacles to successful policing are formidable – and of course this applies as much to drugs and other trafficking as it does to OCSA. Peer to Peer (P2P) internet connections which do not go through a central server or go through hidden servers in the dark web, make it difficult, even with international police collaboration, to track suspects and gather evidence. Criminologists have identified a crisis in generic policing (Fleetwood & Lea, 2022) whereby police agencies, despite specialist trained officers, are unable to meet the technical requirements of policing a wide variety of increasingly complex crimes.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative comparative case study to examine preventive measures to online child sexual abuse (OCSA) in the United Kingdom (UK) and Italy. The research focuses on legal frameworks, governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the contribution of social work. The analysis is based on secondary data collected from academic literature, policy documents, NGO reports, governmental publications and legislative sources. Academic publications were identified through Google Scholar and Scopus using keywords such as *online child sexual abuse, online child sexual exploitation, prevention, safeguarding, social work, United Kingdom, and Italy*. Particular attention was given to peer-reviewed articles examining prevention, safeguarding practices and multi-agency interventions. Relevant studies included works by Quayle (2020), Kloess et al. (2014), Weston and Mythen (2023) and Ogunjimi et al. (2017), which provide theoretical and empirical insights into online child sexual exploitation and preventive responses. In addition to academic literature, the study analyses national reports, NGOs publications, governmental policies, legislation issued by the British and Italian governments. These sources were included because of the limited availability of comparative peer-reviewed articles specifically examining the role of NGOs and social work in both countries.

The rationale in the choice of UK and Italy lies in understanding how effectively both governments are implementing preventive measures to reduce the ongoing issues of OCSA. Particular attention is given to two leading NGOs operating in the field of child protection: The National Society of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the UK and Associazione Meter in Italy. These organisations were selected because of their prominent role in prevention, awareness-raising, victim support and collaboration with law enforcement agencies. While the NSPCC and Associazione Meter differ in terms of organisational history, size and resources, they perform comparable functions in the field of child protection and therefore provide useful cases for comparative analyses. Therefore, the key focus of this research is on how UK and Italy compare in terms of preventive strategies and legal frameworks against OCSA and the role NGOs and social workers in this context.

The selection of institutions included in the analyses was followed by two criteria: (1) legal powers, particularly their authority to investigate or intervene in cases of online sexual abuse, and (2) the extent of their interaction and collaboration with other agencies, including law enforcement, schools, child protection services and NGOs. On this basis, organisations such as the NSPCC, Associazione Meter, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), OfCom, the Polizia Postale and child protection agencies were identified as key actors in the analysis.

The comparison is based on the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) approach. According to Steinmetz and Null (2011), MSSD is appropriate when countries share similar societal characteristics while differing in their approaches to child protection and online safeguarding and preventing interventions. Both the UK and Italy are advanced Western European democracies characterised by high levels of internet access, widespread digital engagement among young people, and increasing concerns regarding online child protection. On the other hand, both countries differ in their regulatory frameworks, welfare arrangements and approaches to prevention, making them suitable cases for comparative analysis. The study follows the Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which conceptualises child sexual abuse as the result of interacting factors operating at individual, family, community and societal levels. This framework allows the analysis of preventive interventions across multiple dimensions, including legislative responses, parental supervision, school-based education, NGO initiatives and social work interventions. As a qualitative study relying on documentary evidence, the research does not seek to produce generalisable findings. Instead, it aims to provide comparison of institutional and preventive strategies across the two countries while identifying similarities, differences and areas for future policy development.

Online risks

The similarities between Italy and the UK are readily apparent. Both countries are leading industrialised states in Western Europe, characterised by advanced economic structures. In each context, there is widespread access to the internet among young children, reflecting high levels of digital integration in everyday life. Both countries experienced the Covid-19 pandemic which significantly reshaped educational practices, accelerating the transition to digital learning. As remote instruction became the norm, students relied more on smartphones and laptops to access lessons, communicate with teachers and complete assignments. This increased screen time creates new risks, particularly opportunities for online groomers (Alliance, 2023). EU Kids Online conducted a survey of children aged 9-16 from 19 European countries revealing that most European children use their smartphone daily. Surfing the net is becoming an integral part of their routine daily life (Staksrud et al., 2026). Social networking enables users to engage in risky behaviour such as sharing personal details, such as full name, contact number, school details, personal photos on social platforms; adding unknown persons to their Facebook profile and so on (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2017).

Among Italian children aged 9 to 17, the smartphone is the main device for internet access, with 84% connecting daily (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2018). In 2021, internet access was available in 90% of Italian households, with 80% of individuals using it frequently (European Commission, 2021). Data from the Italian Statistics Institute revealed that by 2022, 97.9% of teenagers aged 15 to 17 had Internet access, and 92.8% did so daily (ISTAT, 2022). In this regard, the risks of being exposed to online violence may increase exponentially. In fact,

in 2023, 90% of the online cases registered by the emergency hotline Telefono Azzurro, concerned OCSA (Fondazione SOS Il Telefono Azzurro, 2023).

Pornography suppliers, including organized criminal networks who share and sell child pornography for financial gain, access the online platforms in search of vulnerable victims, frequently children sharing their personal details online without awareness of the long-term consequences. Although social media platforms e.g. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and others appear to be user friendly, they enable sexual predators to hunt for vulnerable children. Grooming involves building a friendly relationship with the child and his/her guardians, creating a routine. A trust-based relationship helps the abuser to build a closer connection with the child (Kloess et al., 2014).

Usually, offenders target emotional and vulnerable children as they can be more easily persuaded. Recent research conducted by the OS.MO.CO.P (World Observatory Against Pedophilia), found that a significant number of young people with disabilities are being contacted on social networks, circuits and induced to produce sexually explicit material, often with extortionate requests under the threat of disclosing pornographic material. This is the so-called 'Revenge Porn', the practice of taking revenge on someone (often the ex-partner) by disseminating sexual material which portrays them (Associazione Meter, 2024). Also, child pornography movies with the presence of animals are increasing in number, especially dogs induced to perform sexual acts on minors. Such material is frequently self-generated within family contexts. In 2024, Associazione Meter reported 148,720 videos and photos of child pornography (including pedo-mama groups) from Signal App. The use by platforms like Signal of encrypted messages obstructs effective monitoring of users and facilitates illicit activity. These alarming trends underline the urgency of prevention at the national level to protect children and their parents before OCSA occurs (Associazione Meter, 2023). Being a victim of online grooming is a traumatic experience, but with timely intervention and support, the child can overcome this difficult situation. Acting promptly, reporting to the authorities and providing a safe and understanding environment are the key steps to protect the child and help them recover (Polizia Postale, 2024).

Law enforcement approaches

In terms of legal regulation some differences between the UK and Italy can be observed. In both countries the police are involved in the interdiction of offenders. The UK emphasises intelligence-led investigations and frequently takes the lead in international operations. Historically, in this context, Operation Ore was one of the largest UK police operations against OCA crime and involved international cooperation between law enforcement agencies, particularly the US and Australia. In 2002 UK Police forces arrested 3,537 suspects of online child pornography involvement. By using credit cards, worldwide paedophiles had access to illicit material from U.S. website. In two-years of investigation, over 100 children were rescued from further exploitation (BBC News, 2004).

In the UK, responsibility for 'policing' is extended beyond the police organisation to embrace platform providers who are required to 'self-police' by actively monitoring, detecting and removing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and reporting it to authorities. This approach is not entirely absent in Italy, but it is less proactive as will be shown. The responsabilisation of online platforms in the UK is through the Online Safety Act of 2023, the government regulatory agency OfCom and the IWF, an NGO with special investigation powers. The Online Safety

Act, although designed to protect all internet users, is largely driven by the perceived need to protect children against OCSA. OfCom has the duty of developing codes of practice in consultation with online platform providers (OfCom, 2024). The IWF meanwhile, acts as a place where the public can report offensive websites and conducts searches of less visible parts of the internet (the so-called 'dark web') to identify OCSA images and videos whereupon it can request service providers to remove the offensive material. It has been doing this actively since 2014. In January 2025 the IWF claimed that despite the Online Safety Act, the volume of pornography online was still rapidly increasing and called for the government to strengthen the Act by removing the qualification that illegal content could only be removed when it is 'technically feasible' (Internet Watch Foundation, 2025). The government responded, but the main emphasis was on new measures to criminalise the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the development of pornographic images (explicitly deep-fake). In February 2025 the UK government announced an intention to modify the Online Safety Act, introducing new clauses regarding AI Child Sexual Abuse Offences (UK Home Office, 2025).

Similarly, in April 2023, the Italian government proposed a Bill on AI, aimed at regulating the new online technologies and the risks associated with their improper and harmful use (Polizia Postale, 2024). However, because of the complexity in addressing the ethical, legal aspects and technological advancement of AI, the bill may take some time to be enacted into law. By contrast with the UK Italy takes a more law enforcement-oriented approach focused on increasing penalties for those distributing CSAM. The orientation is to stricter regulatory laws for tech companies rather than codes of practice and trying to recruit the online platforms to a strategy of self-policing. There do not seem to exist equivalent agencies in Italy to the activities of OfCom and IWF in attempting to control OCSA.

The main Italian police agency is the Polizia Postale (Postal Police) whose activities include the fight against online child pornography and cyberbullying. Through network monitoring activities, undercover operations and international collaboration, the Polizia Postale aims to identify and arrest those responsible of the distribution of illegal materials, seize illicit materials and dismantle CSAM distribution networks. It collaborates with other law enforcement agencies, public and private bodies (such as: Associazione Meter, Save the Children Italia Onlus, Telefono Azzurro, Terre des Homme etc.), and international bodies such as Europol, INTERPOL and Eurojust to share intelligence and participate in global operations targeting child exploitation networks. A relatively recent example was the nation-wide operation conducted by the C.N.C.P.O. (National Centre for the Fight Against Paedophilia) in December 2024. The investigation revealed that on the platform Viber, 42 groups and 247 channels exchanged child pornography material. Investigators also identified numerous foreigners, from 44 different States. Consequently, the C.N.C.P.O. proceeded to activate international police cooperation through Europol, Interpol and Ameripol (Polizia Postale, 2024).

Another successful recent criminal investigation of national scope by the Polizia Postale, like the UK police 'Operation Ore' (see above) but on a smaller scale, occurred in Tuscany where, collaborating with another specialist police agency, the national Cyber Security Service, the Polizia Postale tracked 7 suspects involved in retrieving and disseminating child pornography. Armed with search warrants from the Public Prosecutor in Florence, the police were able to find 10,000 files containing child pornographic materials (Polizia Postale, 2025). This is a typical operation by the Polizia Postale. However, when these offences are linked to organised criminal groups, the investigation is usually coordinated by the specialist National Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism Directorate.

In the UK there is no equivalent to the Polizia Postale as an exclusive, standalone national specialist agency. Rather the same resources are integrated into the regional police forces (general policing in the UK is organised on a regional basis) and the cybersecurity section of the specialist National Crime Agency (NCA) (National Crime Agency, 2021).

The role of prevention

As mentioned already, OCSA is very difficult, though certainly not impossible, to deal with by police methods of detection. I have described some police successes but only a small percentage of cases come to the attention of police because the internet provides such an effective hiding place and because victims have many reasons not to report the issue. For this reason, prevention has been seen as the main approach to the reduction of OCSA.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model as noted above stresses the importance of a diversity of interventions at various levels of social interaction including individual, family, community, school and social institutions aiming to reduce opportunities for OCSA. Ogunjimi et al. (2017) highlight the importance of early interventions such as preventive educational programmes encouraging digital literacy and school-based online safety education. Primary prevention regards any intervention activity to reduce the opportunities for abuse to occur. This research will mainly focus on early intervention strategies, such as those oriented to schools and parents. An example would be attempts to regulate and reduce access to the internet particularly through restrictions on young person's use of smartphones, tablets or similar devices. There are many other factors behind recent campaigns to restrict smartphone use such as for example the idea that they have effects on intelligence, learning and personal development (Haidt, 2024). Some of these factors are relevant to OCSA. Thus, it is not just access to the internet as such which increases vulnerability to OCSA but also some of the more general social effects of extended periods of connection. Young people spending all day on the internet may become socially and personally isolated: from their families, teachers and their friends. This isolation in itself may increase vulnerability to becoming a victim of OCSA. The connection between obsessive smartphone usage and social isolation was noticed by researchers in particular during the Covid epidemic (MacDonald & Schermer, 2021; Zhen et al., 2023).

Police role in prevention

In both countries there are attempts to educate young people about the dangers of exposure to the internet and various forms of 'digital bullying'. Although law enforcement is traditionally associated with investigation and prosecution, Quayle and Koukopoulos (2019) argue that police agencies can also contribute to primary intervention efforts to reduce opportunities for online sexual exploitation through environmental and situational interventions rather than solely on punitive responses. In Italy this is mainly the responsibility of the Polizia Postale but is also assisted by NGOs such as Associazione Meter. The Polizia Postale provides support to victims and promotes awareness campaigns in schools. Their ultimate goal is to educate children on the responsible use of the network, encouraging them to report episodes of digital bullying (Polizia Postale, 2024). The Polizia Postale organises information campaigns and regular seminars to raise awareness of the risks associated with internet usage. The role of the Polizia Postale goes well beyond investigation and law enforcement and embraces a

commitment to prevention and education, its staff contributing to creating a safer and more secure online environment (Polizia Postale, 2024).

In a similar way UK police also engage in prevention work by disseminating advice and liaising with schools and other social organisations. The websites of most UK police forces contain advice for victims of OCSA (Metropolitan Police, 2025). Most of the links will lead to two other organisations. Childline, which is an advice centre for young people who feel they are being abused and The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP) which has existed since 2006 and since 2013 is part of the National Crime Agency. The CEOP will initiate criminal investigations and refer cases to the Prosecution authorities. It liaises with the main child protection NGO in the UK, NSPCC and other child focused NGOs. Overall, the arrangement is broadly like the relationship between the Polizia Postale and Associazione Meter.

The role of NGOs

The importance of prevention naturally highlights the role of NGOs in the fight against child pornography. NGOs specialise in terms of responsibilities and core aims. In relation to size and effectiveness the main NGOs involved in the fight child abuse are the NSPCC in the UK and the Associazione Meter in Italy. The NSPCC is the only children's charity in the UK with statutory investigative authority, enabling it to take decisive action in safeguarding children at risk of abuse. According to its annual report 2023/2024 (NSPCC, 2024), the charity had an impact on 13 revisions in policy and practice, including the inclusion of compulsory relationship and sex education (RSE) in schools and the 2023 Online Safety Act. The latter requires technology companies operating social media platforms and search engines to prioritise online safety. They must actively remove illegal content, protect children from harmful content, strictly enforce age restriction and conduct regular risk assessments. To guarantee compliance with the new regulations, the government appointed Ofcom (discussed already above), an independent regulator, to enforce the new legal standards and enhance public awareness of online safety (NSPCC, 2024). Further, in 2020, the NSPCC Childline in collaboration with IWF introduced 'Report Remove' to assist young people in having explicit images removed from the Internet. In 2024, they focused on removing the age verification requirement which has greatly increased the number of young people who needed support.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, Associazione Meter plays a pivotal role in the fight against online abuse in the national and international arena (Associazione Meter, 2023, 2024, 2025). It offers various services to the public including prevention programs. Its collaboration with the police is like the work of the IWF in the UK. In 2024, Meter reported to the Polizia Postale 1,996,911 photos, 2,085,447 videos and 8,034 links.

Since 2008 the association works closely with the National Centre for the Fight Against Pedophilia (CNCPO), through a partnership agreement with the Post Office. This allows the association to join important meetings and to contribute on issues related to child protection. Another significant agreement is with the Department of Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior which was renewed in 2023 aimed at the promotion of children's rights, protecting them from all forms of violence and abuse. The core of Meter's activity is OS.MO.CO.P, a highly specialised office in Internet data research of child pornography material. Through this platform Meter's technicians can collect relevant materials and report them to the appropriate authorities (Associazione Meter, 2024). Further, Meter offers a listening centre facility in which,

depending on the case, victims can be referred to various professionals such as psychotherapists and psychologists. In terms of preventive measures, the centre organises regular training and meetings in schools regarding cyberbullying, safe navigation of the internet, awareness and prevention of all forms of child abuse. Another significant support is given by the Multifunctional Centre for Childhood and Adolescence established in 2016. The Centre provides support for both parents and children aged (2-17) through the so called ‘Snoelezen room’, a multisensory approach to the recreation of a peace environment. Finally, it undertakes psycho-educational activities through workshops and summer camps for children with disabilities (Associazione Meter, 2024).

Regulation of smartphone use in school and family

The Ecological Model enables identification of family, community social policy and welfare as key areas for preventive strategies against child abuse. Therefore, alongside law enforcement, prevention-oriented NGOs and regulation of platform providers, the education and welfare systems are major sectors for action. In both school and family environments the regulation of young people's use of smartphones to access the internet has become a major issue both in the UK and Italy. In 2024 Schools in England received government guidance on banning the use of smartphones in school, but the decision was left to head teachers. Most schools now have some restrictions if not a direct ban on smartphone use. Schools in Italy and in many other EU member states also have restrictions on the use of smartphones. Italian governments have attempted a ban since 2007 but without much success. But inspired by the United Nations body UNESCO (2023), which recommended a worldwide ban on smartphones in schools, the Italian Ministry of Education has recently instituted an outright ban on smartphones in schools (InTrieste, 2024).

However, critics argue the most important use of smartphones, and when young people become most vulnerable to OCSA, is outside school hours. This moves the issue to the family as an institution of regulation. Although the UK government sees the strengthening of the Online Safety Act as the most effective overall policy (Boyd & Rhodes, 2025), there is considerable interest in the UK in the Australian ban in December 2025 on all access to social media sites for young people under 16 including outside school hours. Despite controversy about how far the policy has been effective in Australia, the UK government is currently organising public consultation on the desirability of a similar strategy for the UK (Williams, 2026).

The Australian policy extends the regulation of smartphones from the school to the family, the aim being to enhance parental control over the amount of time children spend online. In Italy, the Italian Communications Regulatory Authority (AGCOM) has addressed age verification on platforms disseminating adult content. Italian regulations require parental consent for children under the age of 14 (under the age of 13 in the UK) to create social media accounts. Since March 2024, electronic service providers are obligated to inform customers about the availability of parental software control tools which allow parents to block websites, limit internet time, manage apps and protect children from inappropriate content. Despite these positive initiatives, it is important to highlight that a significant number of Italian parents lack digital literacy, which means they are unaware of how to implement a parental control system (Council of Europe, 2024).

In the UK, Telecom providers and device manufacturers offer parental control settings, allowing parents to restrict screen time and monitor online activity. Age verification processes are also being developed, especially for social media platforms, requesting users to confirm their age before accessing content deemed inappropriate for younger audiences. There are government sponsored campaigns to educate both parents and children about online safety, including setting limits on screen time and being cautious about the types of content accessed on devices. As in the UK, Italy also promotes awareness campaigns that educate parents and children about the risk of online activities and the importance of safe internet usage. However, these campaigns tend to be generally less integrated into legislation compared to the UK's focus on age verification and stricter content moderation requirements.

Relationships and sex education (RSE)

An alternative approach to smartphones bans or regulating time spent online is the education of children to identify and avoid signs of OCSA when they do go online. In the UK teaching children about online safety, including how to recognise inappropriate content and whom to contact in case of concern is part of the school curriculum for sex education. Government guidelines clearly establish what must be taught and at what age. Hotlines and support services are provided by NSPCC and ChildLine for seeking assistance and providing confidential advice and support. Staff working in schools are required to possess the required training and certification related to child protection and safeguarding. Training is regularly updated to ensure compliance with the latest policies and procedures. Some schools may also require specialised training such as handling mental health issues, online safety, or specific types of abuse. These measures are critical to maintaining high standards of child protection and ensuring the safety and well-being of children in educational settings. These initiatives are backed up by other NGOs and semi-governmental bodies such as the Children's Commissioner for England (Children's Commissioner, 2017) and the school inspectorate Ofsted which produce their own reports and codes of practice.

The NSPCC also offers a Learning website which has continued to evolve over time and provides valuable educational materials, as well as support and training. It includes a comprehensive library catalogue and a collection of national case reviews. Its mission is to strengthen the skills of those working or volunteering with children, equipping them to recognise and address instances of child abuse and neglect effectively. In 2023, nearly three million people accessed the safeguarding material (NSPCC, 2024). In 2023/4 It is estimated that over 75,600 people requested help concerning child safeguarding practices. It is important to note that, the Helpline is in partnership with external agencies (26 commissioned helplines), including travel agency companies which collaborate with the NGO in identifying potential threats when UK citizens travel abroad (NSPCC, 2024).

By contrast, the Italian school curriculum lacks a requirement for staff to obtain a child protection certificate or safeguarding measures to identify child abuse occurrence. The absence of a robust system obstructs a clear picture of the cases. However, some schools (both primary and secondary) may have accessibility to the e-learning ELISA platform (funded by the Ministry of Education), that trains teachers on issues mainly regarding bullying and cyberbullying. The course includes tools on prevention and identification of cyberbullying which may often lead to situations of psychological and sexual abuse; how to help students to navigate safely - avoiding the risks of being groomed (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito,

2025). Italy is one of the few European countries not to have a compulsory RSE program in schools (Stull, 2012). Often, such teaching is managed by teachers of scientific subjects, external experts such as psychologists or medical personnel focusing on predominantly biological aspects of sexual activity. According to some British studies, school-based prevention programs should emphasise the importance of the concept of bodily autonomy. Based on the research results, some students reported the need for lessons on healthy relationships throughout their primary and secondary schools (Children's commissioner, 2017). In Italy, local health services, such as family counselling centres or NGOs contribute to provide sexual and reproductive seminars, particularly to secondary school children. However, those opportunities are generally carried out on a local basis and with wide variation across the national territory (Cassar, 2022). The lack of national policies and on the regulation of sex education can be attributed to the traditionalist and conservative nature of the state, as well as the power and status of the Catholic Church (IERS Project, 2015).

Child welfare and the role of social workers

Alongside the school and the family, the social welfare system is the third arm of support in preventing child abuse. Italy has a decentralized social welfare and health care system across 20 regions. Following the Social Reform No.320/2000, local authorities are required to promote children's rights and family support and therefore are responsible for the protection of children under threat. In this regard, there two possible scenarios: parents spontaneously request help, or the Juvenile Court receives an order to intervene. In each case, the local authority will direct the intervention to social services (including social workers, psychologists, counsellors...). To bring into force court orders, the health care providers work together with social services for therapeutic purposes and with NGOs for community care services. According to Bertotti (2020), the Italian child protection welfare system often fails to provide appropriate assessments thereby underestimating the risk to the child. Clearly, social services need to adapt to the new trends, taking into account the online threats posed by the Internet and enabling the recognition of signs of mental/physical abuse derived from online activity to safeguard victims and provide immediate help when needed. Similar patterns occur in the UK child welfare system through local safeguarding arrangements. However, child protection systems differ between the constituent countries of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Island). In England the local safeguarding arrangements are guided by the local authority, Integrated Care Board (ICB) (a sector of health and social care) and the police. The three partners collaborate with multi-agency arrangements aimed at efficiency in promoting and supporting child welfare (NSPCC, 2022).

Social workers play a key role in early intervention and family support throughout the child's development. They are professionals dedicated to the protection of individual wellbeing, focusing not only on supporting victims but also on implementing preventive measures. Schools or NGOs may request the professional input of social workers in providing training programmes on safe internet navigation or risks involved in sharing images/videos on social media. According to National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2017) guidelines there is limited evidence as to which measures are most effective in supporting traumatised child victims of online abuse (including online grooming). As a result, social workers often operate within conditions of uncertainty, relying on multi-agency collaboration (Munro, 2011).

Similarly, Weston and Mythen (2023), argue that child sexual exploitation should be addressed through a public health approach based on prevention and early interventions.

Within this framework, social workers play a crucial role in identifying risks and implementing safeguarding measures alongside healthcare professionals, schools, NGOs and law enforcement agencies. This has led to increasing interest in integrated service models designed to improve coordination. One example of such approach is the Barnahus model which has been integrated within the social work profession across various European countries. The model integrates social workers, medical professionals, psychologists within a multidisciplinary setting, aiming to reduce secondary victimisation and improve consistency in safeguarding responses (Council of Europe, 2024). Although empirical studies increasingly highlight the benefits of multi-disciplinary approaches, there remains limited conceptual clarity as to the determinants of their effectiveness (Herbert & Bromfield, 2017). This suggests that the success of the Barnahus model depends on contextual factors such as organisational capacity, resource availability and effective inter-professional cooperation. Martin (2016) highlights that OCSA presents unique challenges for child protection professionals because abusive material can remain accessible indefinitely and continue to cause harm to victims long after the abuse has occurred. On the other hand, Ravalier et al. (2021) demonstrate that high caseloads and administrative burdens significantly reduce social workers' capacity to engage in preventive safeguarding work, suggesting that OCSA prevention is structurally constrained by organisational workload pressures.

A survey of members by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) reportedly found states that 50% of respondents are unsure how to identify signs of OCSA (British Association of Social Workers, 2023). In this regard, BASW supports the NSPCC's training initiative, *Keeping Children Safe Online* (NSPCC, 2026), an e-learning programme designed to increase child protection professionals' awareness of online threats affecting children. Although social workers are expected to be trained in assessing and preventing cases of OCS, often this does not occur. This research found difficulties in finding an exhaustive literature review regarding BASW members involvement in preventive OCSA school programs.

Regarding online safety training, the NSPCC's platform designed together with the child protection unit of the NCA, aims to help social workers or other professionals working with children to understand online risks and their impact on minors as well as to support families and carers in online safeguarding (e.g. importance of avoiding sharing personal information and nude content). These e-safety courses are part of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), intended to keep up to date professionals working in field of child welfare. Also, the platform offers training related to case reviews through which social workers learn how best they can protect children from online/offline abuses. Most UK NGOs require professionals or volunteers to complete mandatory safeguarding training or CPD prior to employment (NSPCC 2022). By contrast, in Italy there is no statutory obligation requiring social workers or educators to undergo specific safeguarding training. Only international NGOs (e.g. Terre des Homme, Save the children) would require all staff to undertake a safeguarding training course or CPD.

In 2019, Italy joined a project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the EU aimed at supporting youth workers helping children to identify and report child abuse. The training included advice for youth workers on how to differentiate the various forms of offline and OCA, being able to recognize any signs of physical and emotional/behavioural abuse. For instance, a warning sign is when a child mimics sexual intercourse which indicates the likelihood that sexual abuse is occurring (Stop Child Abuse, 2019). The training included information on how to protect personal data online/offline and, understanding assertive communication as a

preventive strategy against sexual assault on minors. In other words, children will learn how to set boundaries without feeling guilty, being able to respect the other person’s feelings and so on. The project applied a multidisciplinary approach, including the involvement of six European countries align with their expertise (Stop Child Abuse, 2019).

These examples notwithstanding, the overall conclusion is that there is limited research focusing on the primary prevention role of social workers in addressing OCSA in both UK and Italy.

Table 1

Comparison of preventive responses to OCSA in the UK and Italy

Dimension	UK	Italy
Main NGO	NSPCC	Associazione Meter
Law enforcement	NCA/CEOP	Polizia Postale
Regulatory framework	Online Safety Act and Ofcom	Criminal law approaches
School-based prevention	RSE compulsory	Not compulsory nationally
Safeguarding training	More institutionalised	More variable
Social work involvement	More documented in policy and practice	Limited evidence available
Online reporting mechanism	IWF, CEOP, Childline	Associazione Meter, Polizia Postale

Limitations

Due to the nature of the topic, it was not possible to conduct exhaustive research. Based on my research I have drawn some limited conclusions. Regarding the role of social workers, there is need for further research in understanding whether, they provide safeguarding prevention programs aimed at both children and parents to protect against OCSA. In this context, there is very limited information available on the British Association of Social Workers webpage regarding what type of intervention is appropriate and guidelines to follow. and, more importantly, in recognising the most effective strategies for supporting victims of online abuses who have experienced traumas.

Furthermore, the ongoing increasing advancement of AI technology has posed new dilemmas to the online surfing. Data from IWF shows that the online space is becoming a targeted area for paedophiles and online predators. Easy access to AI CSEA (Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) imagery, continues to pose high risk of normalising any sort of violence inflicted on children. As AI generated content appears to be realistic, it becomes harder to determine whether the image or scene is machine-made or human-created (Internet Watch Foundation, 2026).

Furthermore, it is suggested that the future investigation should include a focus on the unethical use of AI generated content, analysing potential threats such as online gaming, extended virtual reality (XR) space and how the ongoing technical advancement should be included in the school preventive programs. The UK government showed a genuine interest in

advocating against the misuse of this technology. Also, different British NGOs are continuing to investigate the negative implications of its use, associated with online child pornography. This has also become an object of analysis for the Meter Association, Italia Terre des Homme and Il Telefono Azzurro Foundation. In such matter, as previously mentioned UK government announced in 2025 an intention to modify the Online Safety Act, introducing new laws regarding AI Child Sexual Abuse Offences being included in the Crime Bill. As Policy Manager for Child Safety Online at the NSPCC stated, there is need to protect children and ensure that tech companies comply risk assessments (UK Home Office, 2025). Also, the Italian government has proposed a bill regarding regulating the use of AI.

Further research questions may arise, such as: to what extent does AI-generated content contribute to OCSA? How far can law enforcement mitigate such threats? How can preventive programs help in responding to the issue?

Conclusion

This article has attempted to compare different and similar preventive strategies applied in UK and Italy to counter OCSA. It has been seen how OCSA occurs and how the crime is dramatically increasing worldwide due to access to global communication. Online platforms facilitate offenders to initiate sexual relationships, groom vulnerable children, and finally abuse them. The research highlighted the increase in children's phone addiction and vulnerability to the exposure to online risks. Research showed that both countries, Italy and UK had a similar trend in the time children spend online. As the phenomenon of OCSA is increasing at high speed, new trends are starting to dominate the dark web.

At the legislative level, the main difference lies of on the approach adopted by each country. UK imposes obligations on online platform providers to detect and remove any illicit content portraying OCSA, while Italian system follows more a law-enforcement approach, focusing on increasing penalties to the tech companies. The analyses demonstrated that the Italian framework appears less developed than the UK framework in several preventive areas. It suggests that the absence in Italy of bodies such as IWF or OfCom may influence policy effectiveness. Also, the absence of international legislative and joint police action directives makes it challenging to identify both the offenders and young victims.

Further, the research focused on the role of the police in prevention. It noted the active role of the Italian Postal Police and the collaboration with Associazione Meter in reporting cases of OCSA and, developing prevention programmes to the public. Similar patterns were noted in the UK where police provide guidance to and liaison with schools and other social organisations and NGOs. The research looked at the important similar work of key NGOs, (NSPCC and Meter) in early intervention. However, by comparison with Italy the greater integration of NSPCC's work with training and certification related to child protection and safeguarding for staff working in schools was noted. The requirement for staff to obtain a child protection certificate remains an optional choice in Italy. The research also looked at relationship and sex education programs. Again, the greater attention paid by the UK school curriculum to both offline/online child safeguarding was noted. Italy lacks policies and regulations to implement compulsory sex education across the country.

Finally, the important role of social workers in early intervention as well as in awareness campaigns, and school-based preventive programmes was noted. The discussion concluded by

noting the limited investigation hitherto of the role and effectiveness of social workers in OCSA intervention. These are hopefully issues for future research.

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