Children's access to child protection social work through mobile apps

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Abstract

Direct reporting of child abuse by children themselves is rare. Children's communication is increasingly managed through mobile phones and associated apps. Yet little is currently known about how statutory child protection services might be accessed through apps to support direct reports, or to find out about statutory child abuse responses. The objective of the present study was to identify the characteristics of apps that included reference to child abuse and to understand how a child might report if they had concerns. Searches of Google and Apple app stores were conducted at four intervals over a nine-year period from 2014 to 2023. Developer descriptions of apps containing terms relevant to child abuse were thematically analysed according to the app categorization in the store, target user, and child abuse report function. A total of 258 apps met the child abuse app inclusion criteria, <001 percent of all apps available. Just over a third were targeted at children, and a quarter at professionals. Seventeen applications enabled the reporting of child abuse concerns, of which six were aimed at children. Barriers to access included organizational membership and locality. Apps continue to rely on the NGO sector, schools, and health (i.e. adults) to report abuse.

Keywords: child abuse; mobile applications; child abuse reporting.

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Introduction

In 2011, the Munro review identified difficulties for children and families accessing the child protection system. To date, little has changed at the 'front door' of children's services. Very few children and families refer themselves for help. In 2024, for example, over 85 percent of 620,000 referrals for children in need were made by the police, education, health, and other professional sources (DfE 2024). Other sources are anonymous, unknown, or 'individuals', the ages of whom are unknown. Three pieces of legislation challenge this lack of the child's voice: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which asserts the child's right to share their thoughts freely (article 13), protection of privacy (article 16), protection from violence (article 19), and sexual abuse (article 34), the Children Act 1989 (1989) that prioritizes the child's feelings and wishes, and the statutory guidance of Working Together to Safeguard Children which places the 'child's voice' at the centre of multi-agency practice (H M Government 2023: 18).

Over 60 percent of children in the UK have access to their own mobile phone by the age of 11, increasing to 96 percent from the age of 12–15 (OfCom 2024). They use Api's, or applications, as a quick and easy way to access services through the internet. Worldwide, the most popular apps used by children on android phones 2022–3 are You Tube, Tik Tok, and WhatsApp (Statista 2025). Most children also use these apps in the UK, with between 80 percent and 90 percent of all age groups accessing YouTube, approximately one-third of five- to seven-year-olds, and two-thirds of twelve- to fifteen-year-olds also accessing SnapChat, WhatsApp, and Tik Tok (OfCom 2024). Under the Online Safety Act (2023), electronic service providers (ESPs) must provide a reporting function that children can access to report abuse on their sites. However, under the act, there is no obligation to take action to protect the child, only to conduct a risk assessment of the site and to take down offending material. It is therefore important to assess what access children have to apps that will result in an effective safeguarding response offline.

Offline harms are both under reported by children and over reported by adults (Perrigo et al., 2024). Given the continuing increase of children's use of apps, there may be an opportunity to open improved routes for the direct reporting of child abuse by children. Yet, little is currently known about apps that have the potential to safeguard children from abuse, particularly who can access the app to report, and whether a response is offered that ensures children are safe. The current study presents the first review of such apps available through the two most popular app stores. It identifies the ways in which child protection is categorized within app stores and examines app purposes and limitations. The research was underpinned by two questions. First, what are the characteristics of apps that are relevant to child protection, and second,

what apps might be accessible to children for the reporting of harm and abuse to statutory services? We conclude that current provision for direct reporting is inadequate to meet children's needs in a digital world.

Background

A scope of relevant research published between 2015 and 2025 was undertaken in Google Scholar and Academic Search Ultimate to provide background material for the present study. Search terms included Child Protection, Applications OR Appi OR Apps, Digital OR Technology. Limitations were peer reviewed articles published in English between 2015 and 2025. Over 15,000 results were scanned to identify those most relevant to app development.

Most papers focused on the application of digital technologies to child protection, rather than apps specifically. These covered four main areas relevant to child protection practice. First, those broadly addressing violence against children. For example, an international review by Cronin et al. (2017) found eighteen studies that met their inclusion criteria. Interventions included telecentres, mobile phone communication that enhanced face-to-face interventions, youth-targeted websites and social media pages, serious games, and e-learning. The majority addressed bullying, with only one applied to child abuse directly (Thainiyom 2011), aimed at raising awareness of child exploitation in Asia. Second, the technical literature contains many examples of tools to improve the detection of child sexual abuse (CSA) media online, primarily for use by law enforcement and clearing houses (May-Chahal et al., 2022). A third research focus has been on the application of digital technologies to automate risk assessment and decision making (van der Put et al., 2017), with some advocating their use to improve social work resource use (Cuccaro-Alamin et al., 2017). Controversies around 'datafied' child protection services have continued, emphasizing politics and algorithmic bias underpinning predictive systems (Redden et al., 2020). Fourth, and primarily for professional training purposes, advances have been made using serious games and computer simulations. Asadzadeh et al. (2022) found twenty-two studies that were categorized into six areas of child abuse related work: (1) medical education ($N=4$), (2) prevention ($N=7$), (3) screening ($N=1$), (4) diagnosis ($N=1$), (5) treatment ($N=3$), and (6) forensic medicine ($N=6$) (p. 5). These focused on improving professional knowledge directed at prevention and treatment. In the UK, Cooner, Reeves, and colleagues report positively on the use of online simulations in training (Reeves et al., 2015; Reeves and Crowther, 2019; Cooner et al., 2020).

Connections between social work and digital media increased during the pandemic when a hybrid form of digital social work emerged

(Pink et al., 2022). This saw new attitudes emerging to the use of technology in practice, including multi-agency information sharing in contextual safeguarding (Racher and Brodie 2020; Firmin and Lloyd 2023). Their proposals for the continuing integration of communication technologies into practice mark an important context for the current study.

However, few papers reported on child protection digital technologies or apps targeted at children or their carers, with the exception of those concerning parental safeguarding technologies such as blocking and tracking. Of direct relevance to reporting, technology assisted help seeking is established in many countries, through access to hotlines. Global data from Child Helpline International (2024) find most contacts to hotlines come via the telephone (58 percent), with other automated methods accounting for 41 percent, including websites, forums, email, and social media. In the USA, studies suggest text-based services may improve the reporting of abuse (Cash et al., 2020; Schwab-Reese et al., 2022), and service providers for intimate partner violence find technology can improve access and reporting for youth (Storer et al., 2022).

Studies on the use of application software to support disabled children in the context of child abuse was scarce. One study on 'safety skills' with this group found students with a moderate intellectual disability successfully engaged in video modelling cell phone intervention (Bassette et al., 2018). Ofcom and Rideout and Robb both evidence that young children (under 10) have access to, and use, digital devices. There is, however, very little research on this group in the context of child protection online. We found only one study, which reported on an automated tool (iLookOut) to support early childhood practitioner education in child abuse and neglect (Levi et al., 2021). The tool had previously been positively evaluated across a wide range of childcare professionals in Pennsylvania, showing significant improvement in knowledge and attitudes towards reporting (Yang et al., 2020).

Just two previous systematic reviews were directly relevant to the present study's focus on mobile applications (Pritha et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2022). Wood et al.'s (2022) review of research on crime prevention apps found three apps focused on safeguarding; the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services offered a reporting app, and two apps directed to people in India; a crowdsourced child abuse reporting app (Project Jagriti) (Chand et al., 2014), and Project Spear which focused on human trafficking (Roshan et al., 2017). None of these apps were evaluated.

Pritha et al. (2021) present the only review to search app stores rather than research databases. A total of 3.5 million apps were searched using relevant keywords focused on CSA education, resulting in fourteen apps meeting the inclusion criteria for review. Of these, four were from the USA, three from India, two from Australia, two from Nigeria, and one from each of Bangladesh, Singapore, and Vietnam. Of the fourteen apps

evaluated, six were directed at children, providing CSA education using games, including four apps for children under twelve years of age. Eight consisted of information guides and professional training materials, two of which were targeted to both children and caregivers and six aimed at childcare professionals or parents or caregivers. Highest rating scores were achieved in efficiency, performance and impact, with general app features and functionality achieving the lowest. Two apps referenced disabled children and three focused on gender-specific sexual abuse. Behaviour change following use of the apps has not been evaluated, and only one was found to increase knowledge of CSA.

While this literature demonstrates increasing attention to the role of digital technologies, none focuses on reporting child abuse to statutory services.

Methodology

Ethical approval was granted by FASS/LUMS Research Ethics Committee, Lancaster University. A longitudinal design tracked apps over almost a decade to monitor changes over time. Android Market (Google Play) and iTunes Store (2014, 2017, 2020, Apple iPhone, 2023) were searched at four intervals over a one month period for nine years, each three years apart; September 2014, June 2017, January 2020, and May 2023.

Search strategy

Child safeguarding in this study is broadly defined as 'protecting a citizen's health, well-being and human rights; enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect' (NHS England, nd). Thus, a broad search strategy was adopted with the following terms entered into the subject search bar: 'child abuse' OR 'child protection' OR 'safeguarding' OR 'child safety' OR 'risk assessment' OR 'stay safe' OR 'diagnose my symptoms' OR 'information for young people' OR 'mental health' AND 'children' OR 'young people' OR 'teenagers' OR 'parents'. Using these terms, a total of 381 apps were retrieved (Table 1).

Table 1. App return rates by years and platform.

	2014	2017	2020	2023	Totals
Android	43	26	57	13	139
iTunes	18	59	56	0	133
Apple iPhone	0	0	0	109	109
Totals	61	85	113	122	381

Searches in each year were cross referenced so that apps that had appeared in the previous search were discounted as duplicates. Upgraded versions of the same app were classified as new if content was substantially changed.

Exclusion criteria

Apps were excluded from subsequent analysis if they were duplicated across stores, or the developer description did not contain content related to child abuse. Outcomes from each stage of the search were recorded (see Fig. 1).

Thematic analysis

Across all years (2014, 2017, 2020, 2023), the apps were first classified based on the developer's information and content into the following categories:
- App categorization in the store
- Children as target user
- Children and parent or caregiver as target user
- Professional and/or volunteer as target user
- Child abuse report function.

Totally 258 developer descriptions were thematically analysed, guided by the research questions, to identify the primary purpose of the app content (research question 1), and to consider how the apps might be accessible and relevant to children in terms of safeguarding, particularly with regard to access and reporting harm and abuse (research question
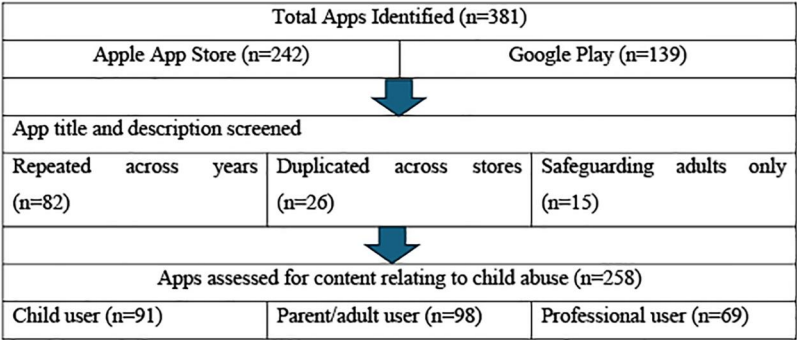
Total Apps Identified (n=381)	
Apple App Store (n=242)	Google Play (n=139)

App title and description screened		
Repeated across years (n=82)	Duplicated across stores (n=26)	Safeguarding adults only (n=15)

Apps assessed for content relating to child abuse (n=258)		
Child user (n=91)	Parent/adult user (n=98)	Professional user (n=69)

Figure 1. The app selection process.

2). Following this, they were themed into categories representing their primary purpose.

Results

Total app numbers fluctuated across the period ranging from 2.7 million in 2014/15 to 3.1 million in 2023, with a peak in 2017 for Google (3.5M) and in 2021 for Apple (2.2M) (Statista.com 2024). The 258 apps relevant to child abuse therefore represent a very small proportion of all apps (<001 percent).

Target user

The developer information did not always make it clear if the app was intended for use by a child, a child and their parents, and/or professionals, with some apps targeting more than one audience. Approximately two-thirds were aimed at adults, be it parents ($n = 98$) or professionals ($n = 69$), and just over one-third targeted children and young people as users ($n = 91$).

Apps included child abuse in associated subjects such as domestic abuse, substance abuse, and mental health. From 2020 onwards, there was an increase in serious game content for younger children with five apps including games for children aged eight years and under. Over the years mental health and well-being apps for young people increased, including for counselling, teen peer support, dating and relationships, and self-harm. There was also an increase in domestic abuse apps over time, aimed at women and the protection of their children.

Thematic review of apps targeted at children

Of the ninety-one apps aimed at children, approximately one-third could be categorized as health and well-being apps ($n = 33$), followed by safety apps ($n = 13$), information and guidance ($n = 12$), learning resources ($n = 9$), and reporting ($n = 7$) (Table 2).

Health and well-being

Well-being apps covered topics such as bereavement, mental health, bullying, self-harm, and peer support. Examples representing this theme included *Counselling for Children*, enabling children to connect with a professional counsellor and *BBC Own It: Child safeguarding and well-being online* which provides a safeguarding keyboard aimed at helping children to access advice. Users can track how they feel and improve

Table 2. Thematic analysis of content of children's apps (*N* = 91).

Themes	Number
Health and well-being	33
Safety	13
Information and guidance	12
Learning resources	9
Reporting	7
Staying safe	4
Schools	4
Child sexual abuse	2
Domestic abuse	2
Child protection	2
Sports	2
Books and reference	1

their well-being by recording feelings, keeping a diary, watching videos and doing quizzes. The app *For Me* produced by Child Line in April of 2017 had similar features and also a contact function. Since the search this has now been removed and is no longer accessible. *Teen Hotlines* lists hotlines, help lines, and web sites organized by subject, including child abuse, school violence, and suicide.

Most of the child-targeted apps appear to be designed by adults. Those designed by children themselves are peer support apps, such as *MeeTwo*, providing peer support, and creative resources as well as links to UK charities and helplines (such as ChildLine, Young Minds, and Brook). The app is supported by qualified psychologists and trained 'super peers', who are undergraduate psychology students.

Safety

Safety apps were mainly aimed at younger children. Examples include the *Safety for Kid 1—Emergency Escape* which had a series of games covering safety tips in case of encountering strangers, getting lost, robbers, fire escape, drowning, and social dangers. Again, most are designed by adults. Two exceptions were *E-safety—Stay Safe Surfing* and *Online Safetee*. The first was designed by a thirteen-year-old aimed at teaching children about staying safe online. *Online Safetee* provides a simple guide focused on Cyber Stranger Danger and Cyberbullying.

Some apps offer guidance on relationships. *Safe Dating for Teenagers* aims to stimulate discussion on sexual relationships and *R U Safe* poses questions about whether a young person is worried that their boyfriend, girlfriend, or someone else is mistreating them. Users can explore healthy and unhealthy aspects of relationships, as well as helping young people understand if their parents are in an abusive relationship.

Learning resources and access to information and guidance

Several apps tutor children on child rights. Examples include the *Child Protection* app aimed at children aged between five and fifteen providing information on rights against violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) offer an app that enables direct contact to the NYAS helpline if an advocate is needed. It also contains information about children's rights in care settings (including mental health settings), if they are a care leaver, or where there are child protection concerns. Key features are helpline access, legal services, and links to relevant websites.

The *Shining Stars App* was created by a fostering agency for children arriving in the UK, particularly unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. The app provides children with information in their own language including on safeguarding, education, health and well-being, and the asylum process.

Over time, resources have responded to new and emerging child protection issues in creative ways. *Don't get Sextorted* is an app specifically designed to prevent teenage sexual exploitation where victims self-generate sexual images that are then used as a form of blackmail. The app provides a naked mole rat that can be sent by iMessage instead of nude photos.

Safeguarding applications for parents/adults

Ninety-eight apps targeted at adults and/or parents mentioning child safeguarding were retrieved. The most frequent theme was domestic abuse ($n = 23$), followed by health and well-being ($n = 17$). A number of apps provided information ($n = 12$), directly specifying their subject content as child protection ($n = 11$) or focused on reporting ($n = 10$) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Thematic analysis of safeguarding apps designed for use by adults ($N = 98$).

Themes	Number
Domestic abuse	23
Health and well-being	17
Books and reference	12
Child abuse prevention	11
Reporting child abuse	10
Foster carers	8
Staying safe	7
Information and guidance	7
Sports	2
Community and online safety	1

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse-themed apps were designed to provide help for victims of domestic abuse, relationship violence, and/or related sexual violence. Although these apps are adult focused, there is acknowledgement that adults have children who can find themselves in these circumstances, and also that they may be downloaded by young people. For example, *The Academy for Professional Excellence's Child Welfare* app encourages adults to assess domestic abuse risk for the adult but also for children, and *Safe Parent* specifically shares information for parents to assess potentially risky behaviours of adults in their child's life.

Two apps under this theme connect directly with organizations. *Family Welfare* allows users to interact with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare to report cases of domestic and child abuse in Mauritius. Similarly, the *DFWAC* app enables connection with the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC), a non-profit shelter in the UAE for women and children. Only one app connected directly to children's social care in the UK (Newham Stay Safe).

Health and well-being

Adult health and well-being apps were generally aimed at older young people or young adults. For example, the *Self Harm* app has interactive options to play different videos that guide the user through an urge, by asking them to promise for fifteen minutes that they will not hurt themselves.

Books or reference

Twelve apps offered information about different aspects of child protection, mainly based on location (e.g. *Child Protection* app audio book based on child protection topics for Arizona, USA); child abuse legislation (e.g. Indian law, *Juvenile Justice Act 2015* app, UK law the *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act* 2012 [*POCSO*] app and *Children Act 2004* app); safeguarding procedures and guidance (e.g. *Wales Safeguarding Procedures* app and *NSW Child Safety Handbook*); parental guidance for assessing any risky behaviours of adults in their children's lives and keeping children safe online (e.g. *eAWARE, Safe Parent, Keep Teens Safe*).

Child abuse prevention

Many of the child abuse prevention apps provide adults assistance in communication with children. For example, *Stop the Groomer* aims to teach children and parents how to spot, stop, and report sexual abuser's

grooming tactics, delivered in a game-like format. The *Child Abuse Information* app describes the signs and symptoms of child abuse giving suggestions to parents on starting a conversation on the topic of child abuse with their children. *Stewards of Children Toolkit* is centred around parents empowering children to talk to them about safe personal boundaries and sexual abuse, designed for a US audience.

Also in this theme were apps for adults who are survivors of childhood abuse, such as *Child Abuse Overcomer* (Android)/*Child Abuse Survivor* (Apple Store), and the *Breaking Free* series.

Reporting child abuse

The ten apps falling under this theme are reviewed in more detail in the Reporting Apps for adults.

Foster carers

Two apps (*Fostering in a Digital World* and *TechSafe*) contained features relevant to accessing child protection procedures but were primarily designed to enable foster carers to develop their knowledge and skills in online safety, thus helping them or adults working with children in substitute care to reduce the risk of online abuse.

Apps for professional users

Sixty-nine apps were designed for use by professionals. The majority contained information and guidance on child safeguarding ($n = 26$) or were education and training apps ($n = 15$). Ten apps focused on reporting (Table 4).

Information and guidance

Several apps provide a range of safeguarding information and guidance on what to do if professionals are concerned about a child's safety (such

Table 4. Thematic analysis of safeguarding apps designed for use by professionals ($N = 69$).

Themes	Number
Information and guidance	26
Education and training	15
Reporting	10
Schools	8
Books and reference	4
Sports	4
Community and online safety	1
Volunteers	1

as *Child Protection and Safeguarding*). Some also give access to safeguarding policies and national guidance. For example, *Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland* provides information specific to Northern Ireland and the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service *CCPAS Safeguarding* holds basic information. Some are locality based, such as *Safeguarding 4 U* providing access to documents and local safeguarding children procedures in Norfolk, and *North Yorkshire and York Safeguarding Children* with information for professionals and the public. Locality is more often US based, for example, *WV HELP* covering West Virginia, and similarly *Child Abuse Info* New Jersey.

UK-based apps can be targeted towards specific professionals. For example, *Nottingham GP Safeguarding* is an information service for GPs and the *Children's Commissioner for England—Safeguarding* (Android) and *Safeguarding Children & Young People* (Apple Store) app provides staff access to their safeguarding policy. The *NHS Safeguarding Guide* is a resource for NHS healthcare professionals, although more focused upon safeguarding adults. *CYP Now* (Children & Young People Now) is aimed at managers and senior practitioners involved in delivering children's services.

A further group of apps, both UK and international, target specific forms of child abuse. For example, *BSCP FGM* is designed to help safeguarding professionals understand female genital mutilation, the law, and their safeguarding responsibility. *Digital Safeguarding* facilitates access to digital safeguarding content, and the *Disability & Abuse—Forensic* app gives professionals points to consider when interviewing disabled children. *Children and Armed Conflict* provides policy makers with key documents and appropriate language to use for child protection, and guidance to field-based practitioners responsible for monitoring human rights violations. Similarly, the *DoD Safe Helpline* app gives members of the military access to resources to help manage the short- and long-term effects of sexual assault. Finally, the *Child Protector* app assists Children's Protective Services, law enforcement, and medical personnel when evaluating children who may have been physically abused, featuring animations of how childhood injuries may happen, both accidental and inflicted.

Education and training

In 2023, four apps were solely for e-learning or training on safeguarding children (two), safeguarding children and adults (one), and domestic abuse (one). The *NAHT e-learning* app provides training courses addressing the Safeguarding and Prevent agendas and offers a route for teachers to achieve certification. Similarly, *New York Child Abuse Training* offers the mandatory child abuse training courses required for approval by the New York State Education Department, and *UN PSEA*

training links to mandatory online training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse for UN staff.

A series of four apps for use by social workers in the UK recreate an initial social work child protection visit in real time (*Child Protection 1aExp, Child Protection 1bExp, Child Protection 2aExp, Child Protection 2bExp*). Challenges working with children and families in high-risk child protection cases are presented, allowing users to watch relationships unfold over time.

Reporting

The ten apps falling under this theme are reviewed in more detail in the Reporting Apps for adults section.

Schools

Many of the school apps concern compliance and regulations, sharing information with the staffing community. *Safer Schools* is part of the INEQE Safeguarding Group's Safer Schools package. A key focus is on safeguarding audits, evidencing the impact of training, and alerting a school with information about serious incidents. The *David Game College* and other schools have customized this app as part of the package. This appears to be a growth area with a further six apps based on school reporting systems retrieved in 2023.

Application software for the direct reporting of child abuse

Over the search period, a total of twenty-one mobile applications enabled reporting child abuse concerns to a safeguarding agency. A characteristic of apps is that they are not sustained over time. In 2023, three apps for adults are no longer available and two apps for children could not be located (*For Me* created by Childline and *Nimos Safeguarding)*. Most apps in 2023 ($N = 16$) were produced in the UK ($N = 10$), with one from each of Cambodia, Dubai, Mauritius, Nepal, Thailand, and the USA (Tables 5 and 6). Of these, five were advertised as available to children, with the remainder for adult or professional use (Tables 5 and 6).

Reporting apps for children

Learning Curve Group Safeguarding allows a child to make a telephone call directly from within the app to a strategic safeguarding lead between

Table 5. Characteristics of reporting apps for children (N = 5).

App	Developer	Country	Apple iOS	An-droid	Target user	Reporting features	Other key features
Learning Curve Group Safeguarding App	Learning Curve Group Ltd	UK	x		Students/learners	Can make a telephone call in app to a safeguarding lead (between office hours). Sends link to safeguarding team via a mobile alert, highlighting that the learner feels unsafe	Links provide guidance on topics relating to abuse. Sign-post learners to third-party organizations such as mental health and bullying help-lines. Report to a ge-neric safeguard-ing email
One (Mind of My Own)	Sixteen25	UK	x		Children	Login Report how you feel	No personal data are stored on device or computer Links to ChildLine UK
SafeSport Helpline	RAINN	USA	x		Children and adults	Call and chat with a helpline	Staffed by trained sup-port specialists
Tootoot	Tootoot	UK	x		Students, parents, professionals	Can log safeguard-ing incidents	Tootoot education ac-count required. Admins and mentors receive notifications. Identifies key trends
Tootoot Sport	Tootoot	UK	x		Young people and parents	Members can report from anywhere, anonymously.	Tootoot sports account required. Admins and mentors receive noti-fications. Identifies key trends

Table 6. Characteristics of reporting apps for adults and professionals.

Name of the App	Developer name	Country of origin	Apple iOS	Android	User target audience	Reporting features	Other key features
CCPAS Safeguarding	Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service	UK	x		Professionals	Text, phone or email the safeguarding coordinator	
Child Helpline Nepal—CHN1098	Brainants Technology Pvt Ltd.	Nepal	x		Adults and professionals	Helpline Report—upload a picture, voice or video	Emergency numbers
Child Rescue Alert UK	Missing People, CEOP, Groupcall	UK	x		Professionals	Submit child details	Provides access to child safety information
DFWAC	Dubai Foundation for Women and Children	Dubai	x		Public	Live chat, email, help line. Talk to a social worker	Awareness programmes (violence, child abuse, domestic violence, human trafficking)
Family Welfare	Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare	Mauritius	x		Public	Helpline to Child Development Unit	Helplines for domestic violence, gender equality, family well-being (in French)
MyConcern	The Safeguarding Company	UK	x		Adults and professionals	Report a concern on any internet-enabled device	Automated chronologies Only available to users subscribing to MyConcern
Newham Stay Safe	Newham Council	UK	x		Adults	Captures evidence through a video, photo, and audio tab Report incidents of street harassment Photo via the app	A direct route to the 24/7 Stop Hate UK Helpline Features a 'Panic Button', with immediate link to police
Report Child Sex Tourism	Cobalt eMedia Solutions	Bangkok	x		Adults and professionals		
Safeguarding My School	Edukey Education Ltd	UK	x	x	Professionals	Reporting form Must log in	Delivers reports for safeguarding leads, senior leaders, governing bodies and local authorities
SOSCVC Child Safeguarding	SOS Children's Villages of Cambodia	Cambodia	x	x	Adults	Submit reporting form	Named categories of abuse Encourages user to register for an account
WEPROTECT	Domestic Abuse Alliance	UK	x	x	Professionals	Login via police constabulary Add victims contact details	Can leave note for best time to call the victim

normal office hours. Learners from the age of thirteen years old upwards are able to make this call by pressing a button, or by using their organizational email address and completing a reporting form. Once they submit the form the senior safeguarding lead is alerted via email. When a child makes a call a message states, 'please wait while the person you are trying to locate is still being located'. The report a concern button reverts to the page to make a call or submit an email to a generic organizational safeguarding email address. The same telephone calling system applies to the *SafeSport Helpline* app which plays music for up to a minute and the caller is then connected to a person within the crisis hotline team. One (*Mind of My Own*) is the only app to connect to ChildLine UK. The connection requires the child to press down and double click to take them to their phone calling screen, so it is not automatic. Both the *Tootoot* apps can only be accessed by an organizational email as the user has to first locate their school or sports club. This is due to the organization having to buy in to becoming a member of Tootoot before a child can use the app.

Reporting apps for adults

Two apps were previously available in both stores but at the time of writing were only featured by Google Play: *Report Child Sex Tourism* and *SOSCVC Child Safeguarding*. Some have restrictions, such as *Safeguarding My School*, which requires the name of the users' school before proceeding to report safeguarding issues.

The *WeProtect* app enables victim referral for police forces and frontline service providers working with domestic abuse across the UK. It requires the user to submit their email (plus email verification), personal details, local police force, and geographical area. Before proceeding to report, the referrer must have the victim's consent, their contact details, and answers to a list of questions. *Child Rescue Alert UK* is intended to be activated by the police and is a system designed to alert the public when an abduction or other high risk child disappearance is occurring.

Reporting apps for people who work with children, such as coaches and teachers, had a variety of designs and functionality. For example, *SOSCVC Child Safeguarding* allows anonymous reporting, and a dedicated team of experts have access to an online whistleblowing system for responding to reported concerns. This differs from other reporting apps where the user must be a member of the subscribing organization (such as a school) or approved prior to having access to submit a safeguarding concern report.

The only app that allowed a comprehensive child safeguarding incident report to be completed by a public user was *Newham Stay Safe* where the user can upload a video, photo, audio, and their location can

be identified by GPS. There is also a panic button that goes directly to 999 for the police. Once the incident form is completed it is reviewed by a team and the user may be contacted to discuss the details of the incident. There was no timeframe indicated for this, or confirmation the report was received.

Discussion

Three central issues inform the current study: the right of children to participate in civil society and decisions made about them, the rapid uptake of digital communication by children, social workers and other professionals during the pandemic, and the prevalent use of mobile technologies and applications by children and young people. Children's use of helplines increased during the pandemic (Petrowski et al., 2021), and evaluations of helpline services note that digital access offers benefits over and above telephone services especially for harder to reach children (Stoilova et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies noted in our scoping review suggest that digital forms of communication on child abuse and neglect are used by, and are important to, children (Johansen et al., 2025).

Apps could provide a gateway for a new digital relationship between local authority safeguarding agencies, social workers, and children in need of protection from abuse and neglect in all its forms. There is a complete absence of apps that enable immediate and direct access to social workers at the point of referral in local children's services in the UK. Recent research has indicated that managers have an appetite for greater involvement of children and carers in co-designing safeguarding systems. They agree that flexible, agile, and continuously improved direct digital referral processes could offer children a key role in their protection (Carlick and May-Chahal 2024). Our app review found no apps in the UK, other than Newham, that would enable a child to open up a conversation directly with a local social worker about child abuse and neglect concerns. All other apps depend on adults reporting on their behalf or require they report from within an organization. This establishes a particular focus suggesting abuse that occurs outside the organization (or care setting) may not be relevant to report.

The number of apps referring to child abuse information and prevention have doubled over the last decade, which suggests a greater awareness by developers of the importance of including the topic, albeit in the context of a range of other content. However, in 2020 and 2023, the search on both stores did not return any new apps that met the inclusion criteria, indicating a lack of development in recent years. The thematic analysis found the most frequent primary purpose of apps to be advice and activities promoting health, well-being, and safety for child users, advice on domestic abuse, health, and well-being for parents/adults, and

child protection information, guidance, and training for professionals. Overall, the topic has a wide range of in app placement, as a general add on to a range of other threats to children. No apps were retrieved for many regions in the world including in Europe, Africa, South America, and China. While this may be a feature of the app stores themselves (both US companies), it reflects barriers to accessibility for children in the UK who may be moving from these regions.

More work is needed to improve relationships between children and statutory services, particularly at the local level. Despite calls for greater child involvement, a recent systematic review established that children's participation in child protection remains adult led, tokenistic, and minimal (Toros and Falch-Eriksen 2025). Co-designed research and development with children, parents, carers, and social workers is urgently needed to improve reporting methods that make best use of these new and emerging technologies.

Limitations

Results may not accurately match current app store offer and availability. Every attempt was made to keep the review up to date but given the rapid rate of app development there will already be new apps available. Similarly, some apps mentioned here may no longer be available.

Conflicts of interest. None.

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