PRESENT AGE
MINISTRIES

How to Keep Your Kids Safe from Online Sex Trafficking

A practical parent and caregiver guide to online grooming, warning signs, internet safety, and responding when something feels wrong.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PROTECTION IS CONNECTION
Technology changes. Your child's need for belonging, trust, and a safe adult does not. Keep the conversation ongoing – not just when something goes wrong.

Why children can be vulnerable

A young person may want acceptance, friendship, love, attention, or someone who understands them. These ordinary needs can be exploited by someone who deliberately builds trust and then uses secrecy, pressure, or threats.

Any child can be targeted. Vulnerability is not a character flaw, and being targeted is never the child's fault.

What is online grooming?

Online grooming is a process in which someone builds a relationship with a child to manipulate, exploit, or abuse them. It can happen over days or months and may begin on social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps, or other online spaces.

Grooming does not always lead to trafficking, but it can be a pathway to sexual exploitation, including coercion involving images and demands to meet in person.

How online grooming can unfold

1. They appear familiar

An individual may study public posts, share interests, offer gaming rewards or gifts, and act like a helpful new friend.

2. They build trust

They offer attention, praise, empathy, or promises of belonging and may position themselves as the only person who understands the child.

3. They create secrecy

They ask to keep conversations private, move to less-monitored channels, or insist the relationship is something adults would not understand.

4. They test and erode boundaries

They introduce sexual topics or material, request images, or pressure the child into activities that feel uncomfortable.

5. They use control or intimidation

They may threaten to share images, expose conversations, withdraw affection, or harm the child unless demands are met.

WORDS WORTH NOTICING

"No one understands you like I do."

"Keep this between us."

"I bought you something, so you owe me."

"If you don't do this, I'll send the picture."

These are examples of manipulative language, not a checklist or proof that exploitation is occurring.

Possible warning signs

Look for patterns and changes rather than assuming one behavior proves grooming. Many of these signs can have other explanations.

- Pulling away from family, friends, or familiar activities
- Quickly hiding screens or closing apps when someone enters
- Increasing secrecy, anxiety, or preoccupation around online activity
- Receiving gifts, money, game upgrades, or messages from someone you do not know
- Distress when unable to access a device or communicate with a particular person
- Exposure to sexual material or requests for intimate photos
- Fear, shame, threats, or sudden changes in mood connected to online contacts

Five everyday internet safety practices

1. Use parental controls

Set age-appropriate controls and review them together. Controls are helpful tools, not substitutes for conversation. (*See our online resource: A Guide to Parental Controls*)

2. Know the popular apps

Ask what your child uses to chat, play, create, and connect – including private messages, livestreams, and AI chatbots. (*See our online resource: A Guide to Apps All Parents Should be Aware of*)

3. Set accounts to private

Review follower lists, location sharing, direct-message permissions, and who can see posts or contact your child.

4. Know how accounts are managed

Use a family agreement about usernames, passwords, recovery options, and device access appropriate to your child's age and needs.

5. Engage with your child

Explore online spaces together, ask open-ended questions, and make it safe to tell you about uncomfortable experiences.

If you suspect grooming or exploitation

- Stay calm. Tell your child: "Thank you for telling me. You are not in trouble. We will work through this together."
- Prioritize immediate safety. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 911.
- Do not confront the suspected offender or arrange an in-person meeting.
- Preserve relevant usernames, links, messages, dates, and account information. Do not forward or redistribute sexual images of minors.
- Report suspected online child sexual exploitation to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at CyberTipline.org or 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).
- Consider contacting local law enforcement and ask about trauma-informed support for your child.

IF SOMEONE IS THREATENING TO SHARE INTIMATE IMAGES

Do not pay or send additional images. Preserve non-explicit evidence of the threats and report the account. NCMEC's Take It Down service may help limit the spread of intimate images taken before age 18: takeitdown.ncmec.org.

Conversation starters

- Who do you enjoy talking to or playing with online?
- Has anyone ever asked you to keep an online friendship secret?
- What would you do if someone asked for a picture or threatened to share one?
- If something uncomfortable happened online, what would make it easier to tell me?

A note for parents and caregivers

Avoid responding with blame, punishment, or automatic loss of all technology access when a child discloses harm. A calm response increases the likelihood they will seek help again.