

PARENTAL GUIDE TO ONLINE EXPLOITATION AND DIGITAL SAFETY

Our children have a desire for attention, self-discovery, and validation through adolescence and puberty, and are at a greater risk than ever of becoming a victim of online predators.

Every person in the world, including children, flourishes in a positive support system. With the increase and transition to remote learning, kids are spending more time away from those positive support systems, making them more vulnerable to negative influences. **We can't monitor our kids 24 hours a day, but we can gain knowledge on these issues to protect our youth while they are using technology.**

As a parent, share this guidance with your family, friends, peers, and your children to ensure online safety for our youth. **If not monitored, surfing the internet and social media can be dangerous places for young people.** Over the past several years, authorities have seen an increase in the number of cases involving children and teens being threatened and coerced into sending graphic images. With this in mind, let's look at some online practices that parents should be aware of.



**PREDATORS
PREY WHERE
KIDS PLAY!**

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

E-TECHNOLOGY

As a parent, it's your responsibility to understand technology. If you are a parent of a tween or teen, chances are your child knows more about technology than you do. That's normal, but to help protect them, you must be educated, aware, and alert.

ONLINE GROOMING

Online grooming is a term used to describe the tactics abusers use digitally to sexually exploit minors with a power dynamic over them to take advantage of them. It can happen quickly or over time. Online grooming relies on exploiting a child's insecurities and trust to shift expectations of what safe behavior is. These "relationships" often result in leveraging fear, shame, and threats to keep a child silent.

SEXTING

Sexting is sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually obscene messages, nude photographs, or videos. There's no such thing as risk-free sexting. The biggest risk is messages being forwarded, posted, or shared without consent.

SOME RISKS OF SEXTING INCLUDE:

- Permanency: your child can't "unsend" a sext.
- Blackmail (Sextortion): sexual messages could be used to manipulate your child in the future.
- Emotional health: if someone shares your child's message without their consent, it could affect their mental and emotional well-being.
- Physical safety: your child could be harassed or bullied.



DID YOU KNOW THIS IS A FELONY?

To create, distribute, or possess obscene images, videos, and other materials that depict a minor engaged in an act of sexual conduct or lewd exhibition of nudity.

BUYING DRUGS ONLINE

Buying illegal drugs online is now common among youth.

Unknowingly, they buy and take these drugs laced with lethal substances, like fentanyl.

Fentanyl can be added to pills incorrectly labeled as common pain, anti-anxiety, ADHD, or other prescription medications, potentially leading to overdose or death.



CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is an aggressive, threatening, or mean-spirited activity conducted via electronic communication (email, social media posts, text messages, etc.). This includes body shaming and hate/bias speech.

PORNOGRAPHY

In today's digital world, pornography is easily accessible on any digital device. Exposure to porn at a young age gives kids a misrepresentation of reality. Porn depicts relationships as meaningless.

The average age kids are being exposed to porn is 11 years old. Many kids are being exposed as young as five years old.

Some kids watch porn and then act out these sexual acts on their younger siblings or school peers.



ONLINE GAMING AND PRIVACY

As kids use online games, there are those who want to harm them in these digital spaces. Make sure kids know who is and isn't appropriate to connect with online. Games and apps are designed to be addictive!

These are just a few of the many games that can be harmful, but any game that has an open chat or direct messaging feature, makes it easy for a child to be contacted and taken advantage of.

..... **ROBLOX**

 **Discord**

 **XBOX**

FORTNITE

 **Meta**



The metaverse is a digital world that allows virtual user engagement by mixing social networking, online gaming, augmented reality, and virtual reality. There are numerous metaverses in this digital space with few rules and new, confusing issues. **Imagine a world where your child is virtually “groped” by someone walking around the virtual world, or the increased availability of virtual reality porn via VR goggles with few parental controls.**

Kids should never create usernames that are derivatives of their real names, or that reveal any other personally identifiable information. **Predators take bits and pieces of information from games and other sources to access additional information about kids online. Once this information is gained, they use it to contact kids with inappropriate messaging, or even face-to-face meetings that could lead to exploitation.**

Parents should understand how to adjust privacy settings. Default settings for many platforms are “public,” which means that any stranger can see what your child is posting. Settings should be restricted to known friends and family.

TALKING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN

BE INVOLVED

Make it a priority to be involved in your children's lives. Be aware of who they are interacting with online through games and apps. Know how apps, games, and DMs (direct messaging) work so that you will know what to look for. Ask your child to show you and help teach you. They will most likely know more than many adults.

HAVE OPEN CONVERSATIONS

Parents, talk with your kids about sexting in a relaxed setting. Ask them what they know about sexting and if it has happened to them. Express how you feel in a conversational, non-confrontational way. Help them understand what it may feel like to have intimate photos of themselves forwarded to any number of peers by someone they thought they liked or trusted. **This two-way dialog can go a long way toward helping your kids understand how to minimize social, reputation, and legal risks.** If they don't want to have the conversation, that's OK—have it anyway. Just don't expect it to last very long and be respectful of how they respond. But, they will know you are there and open to talking in a supportive, non-judgmental way when they're ready.

IMPORTANCE OF PRIVACY SETTINGS

Be educated about privacy settings and share with your kids the importance of having the correct privacy settings on all apps and online gaming platforms they use.

PROMOTE DIGITAL WELLNESS

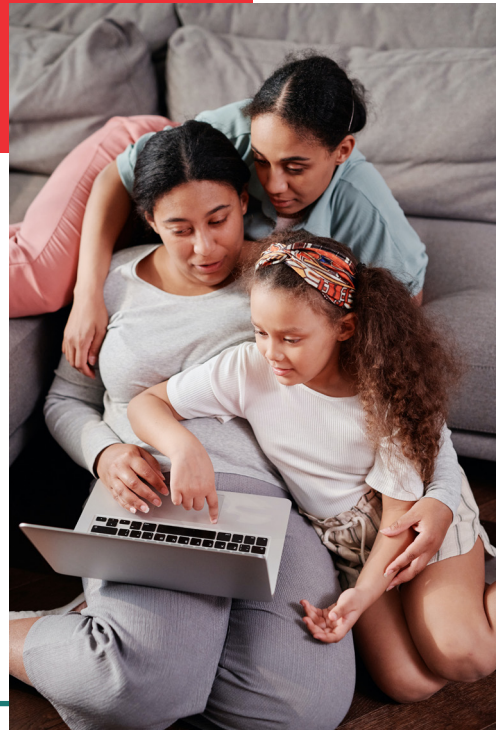
Talk with your kids about setting boundaries with their technology. Creating healthy tech habits is an important part of protecting your kids online and offline.

LIMIT IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

In addition to sexually graphic photos, be sure your child isn't posting sensitive information like their phone number, email address, birthday, or where they live, go to school, or involved in sports. As a parent, be careful and don't post photos with identifiers in the picture, like your home, child's school, or sport's field in the background, or even photos of your child in their school t-shirts or sports uniform.

REPORTING

Stay alert when using digital media. Critical thinking about what we upload, as well as download, is solid prevention, and prevention is the best protection. If your children have received any sexually graphic images on their phones, delete them immediately. Your family doesn't want to run the risk of having what could be deemed as CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material or Child Porn) on any of its devices. Talk with your child about the possible psychological and legal implications. **The owner of a phone, computer, or device with nude photos of anyone underage stored on it could be charged with possession. If the photos go to someone in another state (which happens easily), there could be federal felony charges.** Some experts advise that you report the photo to your local law enforcement agency and the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipLine, especially if sextortion is involved.



BEWARE OF NEW “FRIEND” REQUESTS

The internet has revolutionized the ability of our children to connect with their peers across the world, and this innovation can be educational and deeply meaningful. However, any time your child connects with a “new friend,” there is a real danger that a predator can be entering their life and your home. **Teach your child that a friend is not someone they just met online and that an “online friend” is not the same thing as a friendship developed over time and in person.** Make sure that children are not sending friend requests to (or accepting requests from) people they’ve never met in person.

SET RULES ON HOW YOUR CHILD USES ONLINE GAMING SITES

Take time to explore games with your children. Ask them to show you what they like about the game and show interest. Encourage them to make their profile private, if possible, and to only speak with gamers that are their real-life friends. Require that your child plays in a room where you can keep an eye on them and hear their headset conversations. If your child receives a message from someone they don’t know, ask them to not respond or click on any links contained with the message. Report these users directly to the gaming site.



SET RULES FOR HOW YOUR CHILD USES SOCIAL MEDIA

Require that children use their phones or laptops in common areas of your home, like the kitchen or living room, especially at night. Ask them about who they chat with, along with names or phone numbers you don’t recognize. If you are in your child’s social media group, be aware that kids have created accounts that their parents can view and a separate one for their peer group (these accounts are often called a “Finsta” – “fake Instagram”).

BLOCK AND MONITOR CERTAIN SITES

If you feel your child needs protection beyond what can be gained through conversations or house rules, consider using programs to prevent them from visiting certain sites. You can put a filter on any device your child uses through different programs and apps. To prevent accidental exposure, you can also consider configuring your search engine for “safe search.”



CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Fear of getting in trouble is a major factor in a child’s decision to avoid asking for help. Online predators and exploiters know this, and a child will often be subjected to prolonged sexual abuse rather than risk discovery by a parent. If your child has engaged in sending graphic posts, or receiving them, remain calm and supportive. Your child is likely the victim of a crime and needs your support and protection, not criticism or punishment. Consider seeking help from a therapist or counselor if any incident causes you to be concerned about the mental health of your child.

RESOURCES

ALABAMA

[Alabama Family Central](#) is a collaboration of state agencies and partners supporting Alabama's families with resources, services, and more to help raise health, happy kids.

Call Childhelp at 800-422-4453 to report abuse. For Internet Safety resources, visit [Family Services of North Alabama](#).

The [Parenting Assistance Line \(PAL\)](#) provides helpful assistance to moms, dads, grandparents, caregivers, and anyone who wants to nurture a happy, health family. Whether you need a sympathetic ear or real resources, PAL's specialists are there for you! Available from 9am-4pm, Monday-Friday. Call, text, or use the online chat option. Messages can be left at any time. Call. 866-962-3030.

[NAMI Alabama Crisis Line](#): 800-273-8255.

[National Alliance on Mental Health \(NAMI\) – The Crisis of Youth Mental Health](#)

We need to listen to our young people. We need to commit to keep learning about what they are going through, and we need to invest in them. We can't afford to lose any more young people to suicide or to allow them to suffer in silence any longer. Our young people need us — and we need them. **Call NAMI Helpline at 800-950-6264 M-F, 9am-9pm CST. In a crisis, text "NAMI" to 741741 for 24/7, confidential, free crisis counseling.**

Watch and share our Digital Safety Videos.



NATIONAL

Thorn for Parents ([Be Your Kid's Safety Net - Thorn for Parents](#)) puts more control into parents, and kids, hands. They offer discussion guides for talking to kids between the ages of 7 and 17. You can sign up for text alert reminders for conversations. These provide simple ice breaker conversation starters about the most difficult topics in today's digital world.

[NetSmartz](#) is NCMEC's online safety education program that provides age-appropriate videos and activities to help teach children be safer online with the goal of helping children to become more aware of potential online risks and empowering them to help prevent victimization by making safer choices on- and offline.

If you are aware your student might be, or is being exploited online, contact their parents or caregivers, and report through your mandatory reporting protocols. **You can call the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 800 800-THE LOST (800-843-5678) or make a report at CyberTipline at www.cybertipline.com.** NCMEC's CyberTipLine is the nation's centralized reporting system for the online exploitation of children. All tips remain confidential. Available 24/7.

You can also email gethelp@ncmec.org.



Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people between 10 to 24. Sometimes they feel as though their struggle is being underestimated by their age. But we need to listen to them and let them know help is available.

Call or text 988. Calls are confidential. Visit the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) any time.



LEARN MORE AT: ctf.alabama.gov/digital-safety

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