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Creating a better digital world with children

Talking to Young People About Online Safety

ChildFund
Alliance

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What risks do young people face on the internet today?

While the internet is a powerful resource where our children learn, socialize, and game, it can also expose them to inappropriate content, interactions with ill-intentioned individuals, and cyberbullying or online harassment, even when they aren't looking for it.

It's crucial for parents, caregivers, and teachers to understand some of the most significant risks:

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

CSAM involves explicit images or videos of minors being sexually exploited. It is a disturbing and illegal form of content that poses significant harm to the victims involved.

Accessing, distributing, or possessing CSAM is a criminal offense in most jurisdictions, and it is essential to protect children from exposure to such material. Each year, there has been a rise in reports of CSAM, helping make the fight against its spread more effective.

Technology companies in particular have started filing more CSAM reports after a downswing in 2021, particularly across Europe. In the first four months of 2022 alone, Facebook, which accounts for upwards of 85% of all reported CSAM, flagged a staggering 73.3 million pieces of content under "child nudity and sexual exploitation"— that's just 4 million short of 2021's overall total of 77.5 million.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children says the number of those communicating with children who intended to commit a sexual offense or abduction rose 82 percent from 2021 to 2022.

Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA)

OCSEA encompasses a range of activities, including grooming, where predators build relationships with children to exploit them later; online sexual exploitation, which involves manipulating children into engaging in sexual activities; and even human trafficking online, where children can be lured into dangerous situations.

Data from INTERPOL's Global Database on Child Sexual Exploitation shows a staggering rise of 106 percent in detected cases of online child exploitation between 2016 and 2020.

Grooming: This is a manipulative process in which an adult or older individual establishes an emotional connection and trust with a child or young person, with the ultimate intention of sexually exploiting or abusing them.

The grooming process typically involves building a relationship over time, often through online interactions, in order to exploit the child later for sexual purposes.

Groomers use various tactics, such as flattery, attention, and emotional manipulation, to gain the child's trust and cooperation. Grooming often occurs on online gaming and social media platforms, since bonding over a common interest can be an easy entrance for groomers looking to exploit children.

Experts in this space advise that about 750,000 individuals are looking to connect with children online for sexual purposes at any one time, across many online platforms.

Sextortion: This is a form of blackmail in which perpetrators threaten to share explicit images or personal information unless the child complies with their demands.

When talking to young people about sextortion, it's important to emphasize that they should never share pictures of themselves with strangers and should never share explicit pictures of themselves with anyone, even friends.
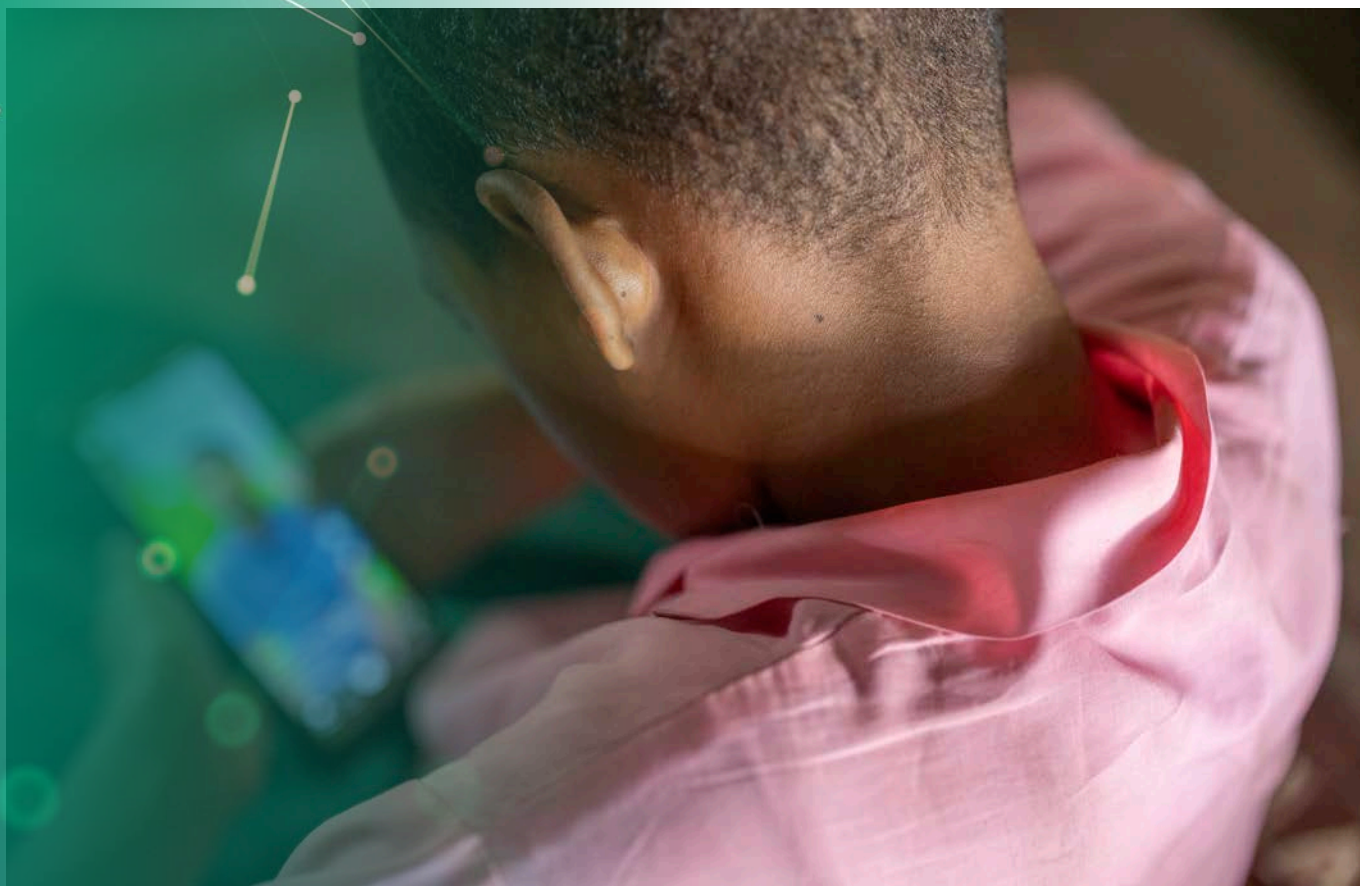
In certain U.S. states, children can be held legally responsible for the distribution of child sexual abuse material if they share these pictures.

Online Human Trafficking: This refers to the use of the internet and digital platforms to recruit, solicit, advertise, or engage in the commercial sexual exploitation or forced labor of minors. Grooming and sextortion are just two types of tools often used by traffickers to perpetrate the manipulation, coercion, or abduction of children with the intent of exploiting them for profit or other illicit purposes.

Cyberbullying

This involves using digital communication platforms to harass, intimidate, or humiliate others. Children may face cyberbullying from peers or anonymous individuals, which can lead to emotional and psychological trauma.

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What can I do as a parent, caregiver, or teacher to protect children from these threats?

As parents and educators, it is crucial to be vigilant about threats to children and take proactive measures to learn what children face in their day-to-day lives online. Engaging in open conversations about online safety and fostering a supportive environment can help children develop digital literacy and resilience, reducing their vulnerability to such risks. Some key topics for discussion include:

Privacy and Security

Teach them the importance of keeping personal information private. This includes their full name, address, phone number, school, and pictures. Explain that this information can be used maliciously if it falls into the wrong hands. Teach them to use secure and monitored technologies, and not to share passwords. This includes using reliable antivirus software, setting privacy settings to the highest level, and not clicking on unknown links or downloads.

Online Communication

Make sure they understand that people online may not always be who they say they are. Warn them about grooming, where predators build relationships with children to build their trust with the intention of exploiting them later. Share that some groomers will lie about their age, and that some try to bond with children over shared interests. Share that groomers often reach out on online gaming platforms and other social media, and that even if it seems like they have a lot in common with a stranger who reaches out, they should not reply to their messages and they should tell a trusted adult.

Boundaries

Establish online boundaries, such as not chatting with strangers or accepting friend requests from unknown people. Discuss the types of conversations that are inappropriate and be sure they know that it's okay to say no. Tell them to talk to an adult whom they trust, if someone is making them uncomfortable.

Sharing Photos and Videos

Teach them about the dangers of sending or receiving explicit photos or videos. Once a picture or video is sent, it's nearly impossible to delete completely, and it can be shared without their permission, in perpetuity. Share that they should never send any pictures or videos of themselves to strangers online, and that they should never send explicit pictures or videos of themselves with anyone, even peers they trust. In some U.S. states, authorities can hold a child legally responsible for distribution of child sexual abuse material when they send explicit pictures or videos.

Trusting their Instincts

Encourage them to listen to their feelings. If something or someone online makes them uncomfortable or scared, they should stop the interaction and tell a trusted adult.

Regular Check-ins

Regularly check in on your child's internet use. This not only gives you insight into their online world, but also opens the door for conversations about any questions or concerns they might have.

Reporting

Teach them how to report inappropriate online behavior on social media platforms, on gaming platforms, and to local law enforcement. Let them know they can and should come to you or another trusted adult with any concerns, and that they won't be in trouble for speaking up.

Netiquette

Teach them to respect others online and not to bully or tease other children on social media or any other platform with messaging capabilities. This understanding can help them identify when they are being treated poorly.

Being an Ally

If a child approaches you looking for help, let your child know you're there to support and help them, not to judge or shame them. Never tell the child that the abuse is their fault.

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Child-Friendly Answers to Questions Young People Might Ask

What should I do if I accidentally open a link or an email that I think is dangerous or inappropriate?

If you accidentally open something that you think is dangerous or inappropriate, it's important to close it right away and not click on any additional links or download anything. You should also let a trusted adult know, so we can take steps to protect your device and your information.

Why can't I share my passwords with my friend?

Sharing your password can put your personal information and privacy at risk. Even friends can unintentionally do something that puts you in danger, like sharing your password with others or logging into your account and posting something inappropriate.

What should I do if I share an inappropriate photo and it gets shared with others?

If you share an inappropriate photo—even if it doesn't go viral—this is very serious and needs to be reported. Sites like NCMEC's Take It Down can help us navigate the process of trying to take the picture down. It's important to understand that sometimes once a picture is on the internet, it can't be taken down. And although this is serious, it's not the end of the world, and there are many resources to support you through what can be a difficult and scary time. NCMEC and the Marie Collins Foundation are two examples of these resources. But, you'll need help, and the best place to start is by telling a trusted adult.

Why can't I share my personal information online?

Sharing personal information online can be dangerous because there are people who might use that information to harm you or steal your identity. It is safer to keep things such as your full name, address, and school private.

What should I do if I see something inappropriate online?

If you come across something online that makes you feel uncomfortable or scared, tell a trusted adult right away. You won't be in trouble, and we can help you report it, or block the material.

What if I see someone else getting bullied online?

If you see someone getting bullied online, it's important not to join in and to tell a trusted adult. We can report the bullying to the social media platform, and if necessary, to the school or even the police.

Why can't I send pictures on Snapchat and through other social media platforms to people I only know online?

Even if you're just chatting, using Snapchat and other photo-sending apps with someone you only know online can be risky because they could save those pictures or videos without your knowledge. It's best to use Snapchat and similar apps only with people you know in real life.

What if someone online threatens me or tells me to keep something secret?

If someone threatens you or tells you to keep something secret, it is a big warning sign. You should immediately tell a trusted adult. We are here to help you deal with the situation.

Why can't I meet someone in person whom I've only talked to online?

It's very dangerous to meet up with someone you've only talked to online because people can pretend to be someone else on the internet. If anyone asks to meet you in person, tell a trusted adult right away.

Why shouldn't I download or install software without permission?

Some software can harm your device or steal your personal information. It's important to always check with a trusted adult before downloading or installing anything new.

What if a friend sends me something inappropriate?

Even if a friend sends something inappropriate, it's important not to share or forward it to others. Let your friend know that what they shared made you uncomfortable and tell a trusted adult about it.

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What does "grooming" mean?

There are some adults and young people who message children online. It can seem like they enjoy the same things or activities as you, like video games, sports, or TV shows. It might feel like they have a lot in common with you. People do this to make children feel comfortable with them, but this is called grooming. Eventually, groomers will test you by asking you about a topic that makes you uncomfortable, or worse, like asking you to take a photo of your body without clothes and share it with them. These people will eventually ask you to do things you know are wrong or make you feel bad about yourself. Groomers have bad intentions, and it always starts with adults or young people who pretend to like you and share your interests. It's important to be cautious and tell a trusted adult if someone makes you feel uncomfortable or pushes you to do things you don't want to do.

Why can't I use my real name online?

Using your real name can make it easier for someone online to find out more information about you. It's safer to use a username that doesn't give away any personal details.

Is it okay to share pictures of my family online?

You should always check with your family before you share pictures online. Even photos can give away personal information, and once a picture is shared online, anyone can see it or use it.

What if a friend wants to share a secret online that seems dangerous?

If a friend wants to share a secret that seems dangerous or inappropriate, it's important to tell a trusted adult. We need to make sure everyone stays safe, and sometimes that means breaking a promise to keep a secret.

What if someone online offers me gifts or money?

People offering gifts or money online are often trying to trick you into doing something dangerous or inappropriate. Never accept gifts or money from someone you don't know, and always tell a trusted adult if someone makes such an offer.

What if I'm playing an online game and someone starts to bully me or ask personal questions?

If someone starts bullying you or asking personal questions in an online game, you can mute them or block them, and you should definitely tell a trusted adult. We can report their behavior to the game's moderators.

What should I do if someone online says they will hurt themselves or others?

If someone online talks about hurting themselves or others, this is very serious and you should let a trusted adult know right away. We can report it to the proper authorities to ensure everyone's safety.

Why can't I talk to strangers online if I talk to them in real life?

Online, it's very easy for people to pretend to be someone else. Someone might say they are a child your age when they're actually an adult with bad intentions. This is why it's important to only chat online with people you know in real life.

Can I tell a person online about my secrets?

It's important to be careful about sharing personal feelings or problems with people online, especially strangers. They might not have your best interests at heart. If you're feeling upset or troubled, it's best to talk to a trusted adult or a friend whom you can talk to in person.

What's wrong with telling someone online which school I go to?

Sharing the name of your school can help someone online find out where you are in real life. This can potentially put you in danger, so it's best to keep this kind of information private.

What if I'm not sure if something is inappropriate or not?

If you're ever unsure about something, it's always best to ask. We are here to help you understand and navigate these situations.

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