Internet Safety 101:
Online Predators & Grooming

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Facts About Online Predators
Parents Need to Know

This is a tough subject to read about and discuss, but an important one nonetheless. Our goal is to provide you with the tools you need to keep your kids safe, online and off. This guide is meant to be a conversation starter for parents – to empower you with facts, talking points and an action plan to discuss with your child, tween or teen.

60% of teens say they have created social media accounts that their parents are unaware of.

Approximately 1 in 7 youth internet users received unwanted sexual solicitations.

1 in 25 youths received an online sexual solicitation in which a predator tried to make offline contact.

In more than one-quarter of incidents, predators asked youths for sexual photographs of themselves.

In nearly half of the cases, predators offered gifts or money during the relationship-building phase.

76% of first encounters with a predator happen in an online chat room.

Only 5% of the predators told their victims that they were in the same age group as the victims.

15% of phone-owning teens (12-17) say they have received sexually suggestive nude/seminude images of someone they know via text.

Who’s Most at Risk?

- Kids aged 12 to 15.
- Girls are more frequent victims.
- Children who don’t live with both parents.
- Children living in homes with parental discord, divorce, or domestic violence.

Source: enough.org Keeping Up With Generation App

Source: National Sex Offender Public Website

Source: CNN, VictimsofCrime.org
Strangers can be found all over the internet, especially since many sites and apps are reliant on individual users to enter their own information when signing up. However, it can be easy to remain anonymous, if you choose to enter inaccurate information.

Surprisingly, impersonation only accounts for roughly 5% of all online predator cases, with the greater threat coming from adults befriending kids, tweens and teens as themselves.

Traditionally, online predators contact their victims using four main ways:

- Forums/Chat Rooms
- Webcams
- Phones
- Online Game Forums

With the rise of internet use among kids and roughly 2.8 million Google Play apps and 2.2 million iTunes apps available, these modes of communication have become more frequent and more intimate with daily use.

When evaluating the ways your kids could be exposed to predators, first look at the websites and apps they consistently use. Not all apps are bad, but some may have features that could be unsafe for kids.

With kids of all ages using the internet on a daily basis, the possibility of stumbling across potential harmful strangers is increasingly likely. Many predators use popular social networking sites and apps that teens are on to connect with them where they spend their time online.

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**Most Popular Social Media Sites Teens Use**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Site</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statista, Leading Social Media and Networking Sites Used by Teenagers in United States, May 2019
Take a look at some of the most popular apps teens are using in the graphic below. Again, they’re not all appropriate for younger users, so diligence and research are important before handing over a phone with unlimited internet access to your kids.

### Most Popular Apps Among Teens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media</th>
<th>Messaging Apps</th>
<th>Group Chat</th>
<th>Live Stream/Video Apps</th>
<th>Video Game Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>House Party</td>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>Twitch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
<td></td>
<td>TikTok</td>
<td>Discord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>Yubo (formerly Yellow)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Monkey</td>
<td>Steam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Kik</td>
<td>MeetMe</td>
<td>You Now</td>
<td>Roblox</td>
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</tbody>
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### Questions to Ask About Apps

Not sure if an app is safe for your child to use? Consider these few things before saying yes.

1. **What age does the app require users to be?**
2. **Does it have direct messaging or chat capabilities?**
3. **Are users live streaming?**
4. **Are content filters or parental controls available?**
5. **Does it use location tracking?**

Be sure you know which apps your kids are using & evaluate each one to see if it’s safe. Use Zift’s [App Advisor](#) to help you find the most up-to-date app information.
Grooming Signs to Look For from Sexual Predators

For as much as we protect our kids from talking to strangers on the playground, it is equally
important, if not more so, to teach our kids to not talk to strangers online. However, online
predators are very emotionally intelligent and expert manipulators, so kids may not always
realize they are dealing with a predator.

There are three major types of grooming that predators utilize:

- **Complimentary**: using flattery to appeal to a victim
- **Mentor**: positioning themselves as a trusted problem-solver or advice-giver
- **Experience Mirroring**: sharing similar interests or life experiences

**Grooming: (verb)**
When someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for
the purposes of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or trafficking.

*Source: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children*

To spot the signs of grooming, parents first need to understand the stages a
predator goes through.

**Stage 1: Friendship**
Online predators use this stage to begin building a relationship with a victim by
showing affection, interest and attention to a victim. They will find ways to identify,
commiserate, sympathize and bond with a target in the hopes of gaining their trust.
They will also use this time to learn as much information about the victim, their family
and their habits.

**Terms Used**: slang, pop culture references, probing questions about family & friends,
interest in daily activities & routines
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

In this stage, a predator begins to introduce sexual language into the conversation and will gradually establish a need for sexual fulfillment from the victim. The need for secrecy and a stronger relationship bond is also required at this stage.

**Terms Used:** sexual words, body parts, terms of affection

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Stage 3: Sexual

Predators will advance the relationship with a target by insisting on face-to-face meetings in order to solidify their relationship. There is more urgency for sexual fulfillment from the victim and emotional manipulation is strongest in this stage. Gifts or threats are also possible during this stage.

**Terms Used:** stronger sexual words, urgency, demands, emotional triggers, action words, specifics of location/time/date

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Spotting the Signs

Is your child becoming increasingly secretive or private?

Do they talk about a friend you’ve never met?

Are they bringing home presents or gifts that aren’t from peers or family?

Are they becoming more curious about their body and/or sexuality?

Do they hide their online activity, text messages or phone calls?

Are they becoming more isolated and removed from their school friends and activities?
Are Predators Lurking in Your Child’s Video Games?

It may seem great to be able to stream Netflix through your child’s Xbox, PlayStation or Wii, but that online capability could be putting your child in danger. Online games have featured chat rooms for years, but gaming consoles, with the ability to play both online and off, create an added security threat for concerned, and often unsuspecting, parents.

Online predators are now using gaming to infiltrate the ranks of innocent children, grooming them through game chat features.

Especially disconcerting is the use of video chats in this process, in which internet predators have the ability to disable their webcam, but can ask your child to enable his own camera. Not only does this give a stranger real-time audio and visual access to your child, it allows them to vet victims and evade undercover police, posing as children to catch internet predators.

Know the Controls
Treat your child’s gaming console as you would their smartphone and social media platforms. Familiarize yourself with all of the system’s features, and learn how to enable parental controls. Explore all of the features of the console, and learn how to disable features such as internet access and video streaming, if possible.

If you choose to allow your child to play games online with others, sit with them while they play, or play along with them. Ask plenty of questions. Ask to see how they use chat and video functions to communicate with others and determine whether or not your child can handle that responsibility.

Beware of Impulse Control Issues
Remember that your child’s brain isn’t fully formed, and that the underdeveloped frontal lobe can cause problems with impulse control and forward thinking. Not only are you dealing with a child who is biologically challenged to act only after thinking things through (like accepting friend/messaging requests from strangers), but you also have a child who is in the throes of game play.

Chat and messaging features in online games can create confusion in younger children. The lines between fantasy and reality become blurred when you mix a game with the ability to chat with someone who is only there in the virtual sense and this aspect of online gaming can create tricky situations.
**Stranger Danger**

It’s always smart to remind your child of the rules of engagement and of your expectations for good online behavior. If you allow the chat or video chat features to be enabled when playing, make it very clear who your child is, and is not, approved to be socializing with.

Some online games, such as Minecraft, allow parents to create their own groups on a localized server, or provide a handful of groups that are constantly monitored by a responsible adult. Take the time to research the game your child is playing, and see if any of these options are available to provide a safer social gaming experience.

As always, communicate with your child, in addition to monitoring their gaming interactions, to ensure that they feel comfortable enough to come to you, should a negative experience arise.
Sextortion: A Growing Problem for Teens

With the rise in smartphone and internet usage by children, the landscape of online predation has changed drastically. It’s no longer solely a matter of protecting kids from inappropriate images online, it’s now become an issue of kids sharing explicit photos and videos at their own will and then being exploited by predators.

Social media and access to a camera phone with location data is making it easier than ever for sexual predators and cyberbullies to target kids through what experts are calling “sextortion”.

The FBI has even issued a warning on the rise of sextortion cases, stating that online predators are now befriending kids on social media and convincing them to take explicit photos, then using bullying tactics to get the minors to continue sending mature videos.

The rise in sextortion is also increased by the fact that teens are sharing more information about themselves on social media sites than they did in the past. Here are some of the kinds of information these teens are posting:

### Personal Information Shared on Social Media

- **Post a real name**: 92%
- **Post a photo of themselves**: 91%
- **Post their school name**: 71%
- **Post the city or town where they live**: 71%
- **Post their email address**: 53%
- **Post their cell phone number**: 20%

Source: PEW Research Center
How to Teach Kids to be Smart About Online Strangers

Online predators aren’t something we want to talk to our kids about. We want to believe that our kids wouldn’t be lured by one and that if they were approached, they would tell us.

One in seven kids who regularly log on to the internet say they have received an unwanted sexual solicitation via the web. Only 25% of those told a parent.

Given this startling reality, we need to educate our children on the risk and provide them with the necessary tools and strategies to successfully manage any communications they may receive. Here are some important tips to consider as you prepare your child for this very real threat:

Start the Conversation
Don’t hesitate to talk with your child about online predators and strangers. In an age appropriate manner, explain to them what they are, what their motives are and reinforce they are not to be trusted.

Educate About Grooming Tactics
Make sure your child understands the red flags of grooming. Talk through examples with them on what things they may hear in an online chat. Some of these things may include:

- “Let’s chat privately.”
- “I’d love to meet you. Where do you live?”
- “Where do you hang out?”
- “What do you like to do with your friends?”

Minimize Shame
Above all else, it is vitally important that your child trusts you can turn to you if they feel unsafe or question an online interaction. While explaining the risks, be sure to also reinforce you are there to help them navigate this online world.

Monitor Online Activity
Keep the family computer in a neutral space in the house where everyone can see online behavior. Set screen time limits on the amount of time your child spends online or using apps. Don’t just monitor the technology – ask questions about your child’s online activity by being inquisitive and curious.
8 Important Steps to Keep Kids Safe Online

By speaking openly with kids about the dangers of social media, sexting, and online predators, parents can better prepare children for the dangers of online activity. Kids need to know that everything put online can be accessed by others, even when only shared with people they know.

It’s easy for a picture or video to be saved and shared, creating an opportunity for predators and cyberbullies to take advantage of the situation. Setting strict security parameters and keeping cell phones and personal computers in a communal area are good ways to monitor online activity.

1. Keep Open Communication

While it can be difficult for parents to talk to their kids about online predators and sexual exploitation, it’s essential to keeping them safe. Before a child is allowed to have any sort of social media account, parents and caregivers should be speaking openly about the dangers of online predators and cyberbullying.

Let them know they can talk to you about anything on their mind without fear of overreaction, judgment or punishment.

2. Set Privacy and Security Settings

For minors especially, it is essential to have security settings in place. Parents should also monitor their child’s social media activity by becoming “friends” or following them on various social media accounts and being present while kids are using social media in the house. Using a Family Media Contract, is a great way to create healthy boundaries for your family.
3. Keep Phones & Computers in Communal Areas
The FBI suggests keeping all cell phones and personal computers in a communal location. Special Agent John Letterhos, who works with the Child Exploitation Task Force in Charlotte, NC, told reporters that he’s noticed video and photos in “sextortion” cases were almost always taken inside the bedroom.

By requiring kids to use social media in the living room or other communal locations, it helps prevent this kind of dangerous activity.

4. Establish a Code Word
Having a code word is especially important, should your child find themself in a dangerous situation. Whether it be when with friends, or out playing Pokémon, set a code word with your child when you’re going over the rules of engagement. This way your child can let you know that they’re in danger, without alerting the person or people they’re with. Choose a word or phrase that is common enough to remember, but not too generic.

5. Turn Location Services OFF
This one is pretty self-explanatory, but it’s an important step that can be easily overlooked. Whenever possible, make sure the location services on your child’s phone or individual apps are disabled.

6. Keep Live Streaming in Check
In the public realm of live streaming, choosing a screen name that hides your kids’ identities is a must. Keep it generic and think about making the profile picture for your child’s account generic as well. Additionally, in the live streaming space, it is important for parents to jump onto their kids live broadcasts to keep things in check by passively watching.

7. Use Digital Tools
There are helpful tools, like Net Nanny, available to parents to help them keep track of your child’s location, popular apps downloaded to their device and screen time scheduling.

8. Follow the Rules
Social networking sites require a minimum age for use. These guidelines are meant to keep your kids safe. Remember, most popular sites and apps start at age 13, but some aren’t recommended for users under 17 or 18.
How to Report Online Predators

Spotting an online predator can be difficult, especially since they specifically seek out anonymous online channels that allow direct contact with vulnerable kids. Being aware of grooming language and hot spots of apps or websites where strangers may hang out are two of the most important steps for parents and kids.

Once you’ve identified a predator, though, what do you do?

It can be hard to know what the appropriate steps are after uncovering a stranger who’s communicating with your child. Below are a few resources you can use to easily and quickly report a potential child predator.

- **Contact Local Law Enforcement**

- **Make a Report Using CyberTipline**
  This tool is backed by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. It provides a very detailed reporting tool that forwards your tips on to law enforcement.

It is important to remember, that these reporting methods should only be used to report “potential” child predators. If they don’t take any action on your report, take it to a higher level and contact your local FBI offices.
Online Safety Checklist for Families

Print this handy checklist and post it on your fridge, family memo board or by the computer for easy reference.

☐ Talk about online strangers.
Talk to your kids about stranger danger, online predators and what grooming is and looks like. Let them know that they should come to you as soon as they have an uncomfortable or questionable encounter on the internet.

☐ Review internet safety rules.
Reiterate the rules of online safety, and remind your kids to never share personal or identifying information online. Remind them to ignore friend requests from people they don’t know, or don’t know well, when on social media or in open forums.

☐ Open the lines of communication.
Let your children know that they can talk to you if they encounter, experience or witness something online that makes them uncomfortable. Assure them that you won’t get upset or take away online privileges when they come to you.

☐ Share an email account.
Share an email account with your child, or at least know their password, so that you can monitor their electronic correspondence.

☐ Be your child’s friend.
Make sure you are a friend or follower on your child’s social media accounts so that you can monitor their activity. Take a look at who your child is interacting with, and ask questions if you don’t know their online friends.

☐ Stay on top of digital trends.
One of the best ways to keep your kids safe online is to be aware of the latest trends and apps.

☐ Keep computer in central location.
Keep your family computer in a centralized, visible location, so you can easily monitor online activity.

☐ Collect devices at night.
Not only do electronic screens disrupt sleep at night, but it’s harder to monitor your child’s online activity when it takes place behind closed doors and after everyone’s asleep.

☐ Set time limits.
Set and enforce time limits on internet use for entertainment or social purposes. You can do this by creating specific windows of time each day when your kids are allowed to use their devices.

☐ Monitor online activity.
When you collect your child’s device(s) each night, review their activity to ensure that internet safety rules are being followed.
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