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Identifying Online Predators

Teens and preteens can spend hours online chatting with “friends” via social media and online gaming and it’s important to know how to identify online predators. Online predators are one of the greatest threats to you and your family’s personal safety. Sexual predators no longer have to take to the streets to find their next possible victim. All they have to do is simply target their next victim using social media and online gaming sites. In fact, research indicates that 82% of online sex crimes against minors begin with the offender using the child’s social networking site to gain information. It’s important as parents to use the many resources available to help protect our children from the dangers of the internet.

Recognizing Online Predators

Online predators can be hard to identify. Because of the online environment, they can seem to be completely normal people. Common characteristics of predators include: appear trustworthy at first; pretend to share common interests with targeted victims; will engage in as many activities with children as possible; look for children who are emotionally vulnerable; pretend to be someone he/she is not in order to take advantage of children; very good at internet lingo to help coerce young victims; and will become more provocative as he/she feels the victim is beginning to trust.



How Predators Work

Predators may start with a “grooming” process in order to gain a child’s trust—this can occur over a short time or it may take months. Online predators “groom” a child in order to manipulate the child into meeting in real life with the sole goal of assaulting them. The goal is to make the victim feel loved and comfortable by providing affection, attention, kindness an/or sending gifts. They will be up-to-date on popular music and hobbies to keep your child’s attention. Once they have gained their victim’s trust, they will slowly start including sexual content to their conversation.

Grooming Tactics Include:

- **Chatting Privately:** They will ask to talk with their victims privately or by phone/text messaging.
- **Flattery:** Online predators will flatter or give special attention to their victims. They will say they are in love or make promises.
- **Intimidation:** Once an online predator knows their victim, they start to intimidate or threaten them by exposing pictures or information.
- **Asking for Personal Information:** Asking about their victim’s interests (games, movies, music) gives the predator the upper hand when sending gifts. If they send a gift, the victim becomes comfortable with giving out their address.

- Sympathy: Predators can post as other teenagers using sympathy to gain their trust. When teens are at a certain age, they start to feel that no one understands them and they search for sympathy, support, or validation from other teens.

Identifying That Your Child is Being Groomed

- Spends more time online. Children who are being groomed spend more time online.
- Receives phone calls from people you don't know or makes calls to numbers you don't recognize (watch for long distance calls). Online predators will try to contact their potential victims to set up a meeting. If your child remembers everything you have taught them, they won't give out their phone number, but it won't stop online predators from giving your child their phone number. The minute your child makes that call, the predator will have your child's number.
- Receives mail/packages from out-of-state or from names you don't recognize. Online predators will send gifts to their online victims. For example, online predators have sent airline tickets to entice their potential victims to visit them.
- Your child becomes withdrawn or secretive. To gain trust, an online predator will attempt to drive a wedge between you and your child. If your child begins to skip classes or begins to blow off their friends, it could mean they are spending more time with their online "friends". Be especially concerned if you walk into the room and your child quickly hides or turns off their screen.

How to Protect Your Child

- Talk to your child. If you are worried that your child is interacting with a predator, your first step is to talk to your child. Make it clear that you're worried, not angry. Ask your child questions to determine what's going on. For example you could say, "being online seems like it's really controlling your mood lately. Is there some reason for that? I'm concerned about your safety, so lets go over the rules for staying safe online". Remind your child that they can trust you and that you are just looking out for their best interest.
- Check your computers. If you suspect that an online predator is targeting someone in your home, you can check your computers. Check for suspicious downloads and run a security scan to see if any programs have been added to your computer without your knowledge.
- Set boundaries. Set clear rules for your child's online activities. Then, clearly communicate these boundaries. Boundaries can include a "no delete" rule. Tell your child not to clear their search history or cache and occasionally check to see what they are looking at. Set a time limit for online activities and always be aware of your child's "friends". Make sure your child can clearly explain who they are interacting with.
- Purchase security software and install on all family computers. Security software can send alerts when someone tries to access questionable sites, records all online activity, and prevents new windows from opening and stumbling into dangerous territory. We encourage you to visit Catholic Mutual's CMGConnect Parent Portal at <https://cmgparent.org>.
- Guard your privacy. Make sure everyone in your household knows how to protect your personal information. Caution family members against sharing your home address, phone number, location of school, full name, and social media names/pages/sites.
- Avoid chatting or joining groups that include "friends" that you don't know personally.

- Contact the **Cyber Tipline**. This resource is mandated by Congress. You can contact the tipline 24/7 to report suspected incidents of abuse at www.cybertipline.com or call 1-800-843-5678.
- Check the sex offender registry. Many online predators have been convicted of a sexual offense. The sex offender registry is public information. Check your area to see if a potential sexual predator lives in your community. In fact, **Family Watchdog** is a site that allows you to check your area for registered sex offenders. Enter your address to determine if anyone in your area is a sex offender.
- Contact authorities. If you suspect your child is being targeted by an online predator, you should report it. Contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to make a report. You can reach the agency at 1800TheMissing. You can also contact the FBI to make a report. If you are concerned that your child is in immediate danger, contact your local police department.

Frightening Statistics

- A 2016 study by the Center for Court Innovation found that between 8,900 and 10,500 children, between ages 13—17 years of age were commercially exploited each year in the United States.
- 42% of sextortion victims met their abusers online.
- Internet safety is now the 4th top ranked issue in the list of health concerns for U.S. children.
- There are over 747,408 registered sex offenders in the United States, with over 100,000 lost in the system.
- Only 39% of parents report using parental controls for blocking, filtering, or monitoring their teen's online activities.
- Nine in 10 teens say their parents have talked to them about online safety. However, only 49% of teens report their parents do nothing to monitor their devices.



<http://www.minormonitor.com/resource/online-predators/>
<https://www.wikihow.com/Recognize-an-Online-Predator>
<http://www.inksell.com/onlinepredators.html>
https://enough.org/stats_exploitation
<https://images.search.yahoo.com/search/images>