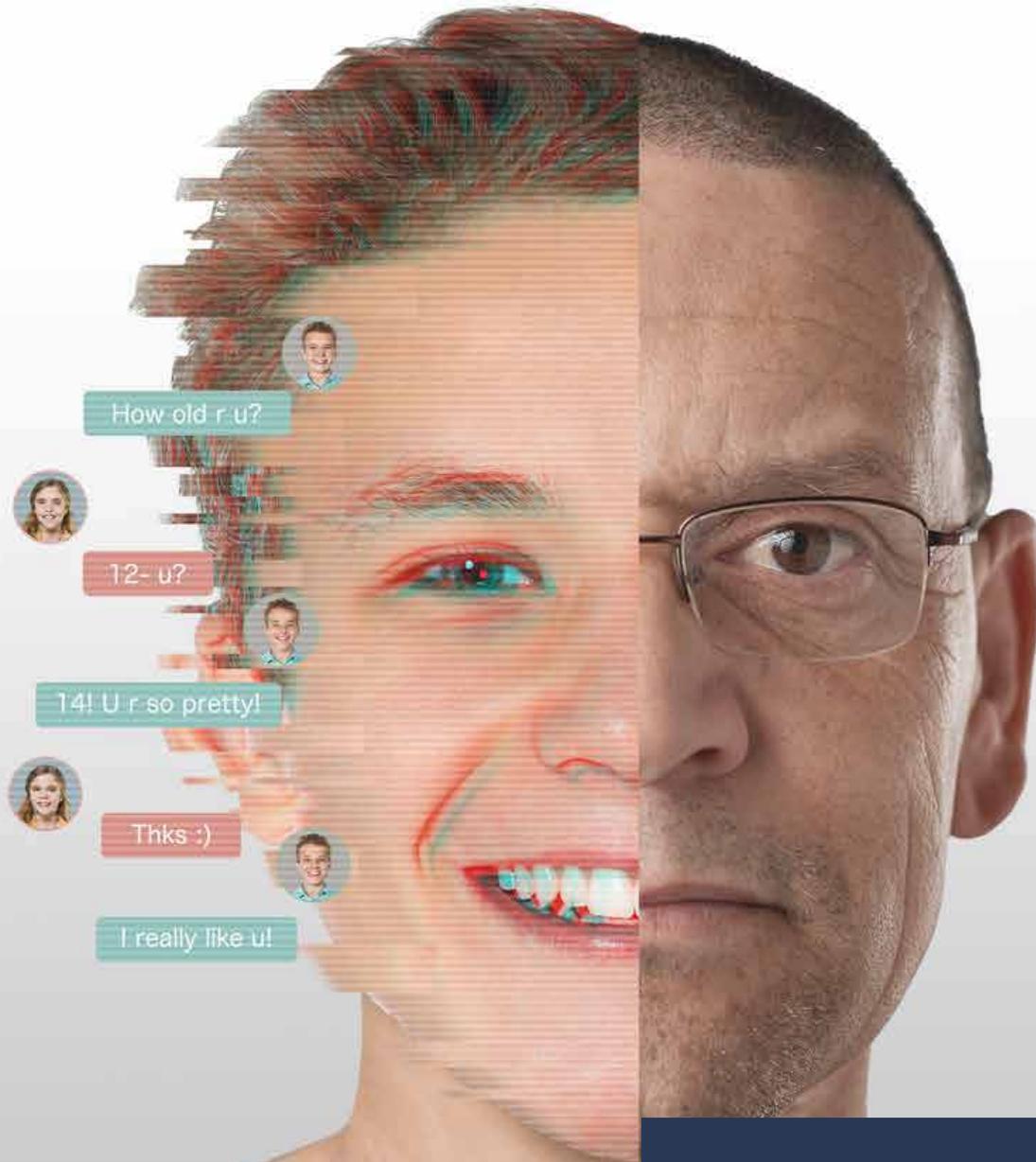


ANY KID ONLINE. ANY TIME. ANYWHERE.



FILM DISCUSSION GUIDE

SEXTORTION

the hidden pandemic

With unique, unrestricted access to government files, victim families, and investigators, *Sextortion: The Hidden Pandemic* uncovers the hidden world of online enticement and exploitation of children--and what we can do to stop it.

Synopsis:

An insider look into one of the largest international child sextortion cases investigated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Department of Justice on American soil, *Sextortion: The Hidden Pandemic* begins with an investigation of the sexual extortion--or "sextortion"--of a Virginia teen and a fourteen-year-old girl from Japan. As investigators pursue the case, surprising new details emerge--including the fact that the same suspect is behind both crimes. And further forensic research reveals hundreds of similar victims across the United States.

With unique, unrestricted access to government files, victim families, and investigators, *Sextortion: The Hidden Pandemic* uncovers the hidden world of online enticement and exploitation of children. Tapping into the findings of child exploitation experts, the film spotlights the common tactics of online predators, the signs that a child is being groomed online, and a documented rise in global sextortion cases.

As the film tracks the ongoing international investigation, it also reveals the investigators' shocking discovery of the online predator behind hundreds of sextortion cases--and his attempts to avoid prison and evade foreign agents. In the final act of the film, we witness the first-person account of S.M., a victim of the same international sextortion ring that victimized Canadian teen Amanda Todd, who took her own life as the result of online predation. Todd's mom and S.M. reveal the truth behind what happened to Amanda back in 2012--and why it's critically important for them to speak out now.

Sextortion: the Hidden Pandemic powerfully brings to life the human impact of this truly global crime. It is required viewing for anyone who wants to ensure children are able to explore and enjoy the digital world safely. Through providing a space for both those working to bring abusers to justice and survivors of abuse to share their incredible stories, it offers a compelling argument for increased action and investment in this crucial area. Iain Drennan, Executive Director, We Protect Global Alliance

Sextortion: The Hidden Pandemic is a must-see documentary. Sexual predators have found a way to extort children in the privacy of their homes. They don't need a key to get in; just a device connected to the Internet. They secretly coerce their underage victims to produce sexual images, to have sex with them or give them money. At the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children we see the devastating impact of these crimes every day.

*John Shehan, Vice President, Exploited Children Division
The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children*



SCREENING EVENT QUESTIONS:

PRE- SCREENING OVERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- What role does the Internet play in our kids' lives?
- What about Social Media? Messaging apps? Gaming platforms? or
- What are some characteristics of a healthy social interaction that takes place online?
- In your opinion, what factors can make an online interaction harmful or dangerous?

QUESTIONS FOR TEENS:

- *What role does social media and the internet play in your life?*
- *What social media, messaging apps, or gaming platforms do you use? How often do you use them?*
- *Can you give some examples of healthy social interactions that you've had online?*
- *What kind of communication online would make you worry about something harmful or dangerous happening?*

POST- SCREENING OVERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- Do you know all the platforms that your child uses to go online? What about their access at school, friends' houses, etc.?
- How have you spoken to your child about online safety?
- What are your rules and household practices around technology? Are there any practices you may update after seeing this film?

In the film, Erin Burke (Homeland Security, section chief for Cyber Crimes CEIU and Victim Identification Program) says that often when they knock on the door of parents whose children have been involved in sextortion, the parents "had zero idea that their child was either on the app or on the website where they met the predator." How can adults create relationships and environments that will help children and teenagers feel comfortable enough to ask for help if they are being sextorted?

QUESTIONS FOR TEENS:

- *Do you talk with your parents, guardians, or other trusted adults about the platforms and apps you use online? Why or why not?*
- *Do you have rules for online communication at home? If so, do you follow those rules?*
- *Who could you go to or ask for help from if someone tried to harm you online? What do you think adults can do to make you feel safe to talk to them about internet dangers?*
- *What would you say to a friend who shares they are being sextorted?*

ABOUT SEXTORTION:

Sextortion is a type of blackmail used by offenders to acquire additional sexual content from the child, coerce them into engaging in sexual activity, or to obtain money from the child. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) receives reports of online child exploitation, including reports of sextortion.

Analyses done by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) have found that children who are victims of sextortion are often targeted and blackmailed by an individual they met online who had obtained the initial sexual image from the child through deceit, coercion, or another method. This type of victimization takes place across every platform, including social media, messaging apps, and gaming platforms.

The most common tactics used to entice children seem to be

engaging in sexual conversation, asking the child for sexually explicit images of themselves, or mutually sharing images (often the images shared aren't actually of the offender, they are of someone else). Those images are then turned around and used to blackmail the child. Sadly, the cases such as those featured in *Sextortion: The Hidden Pandemic* are not uncommon. Offenders are skilled at exploiting the fact that many children are eager to explore relationships, but they are inexperienced and have difficulty identifying when they are being manipulated. This has always been true, but of course the ability to circulate images worldwide instantaneously means children today face more online risks than in previous generations when they trust the wrong person.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- What is sextortion? Have you heard about it before seeing the film?
- How was H.M. sextorted in the film?
- How did H.M. initially perceive Steve Crofton? Why? How did he gain her trust? Sextortion numbers are rising (see the statistics below). Why do you think the numbers are going up so dramatically?
- Have you ever thought about your kid not being safe online in those terms? How so?
- How do Carol Todd's words about not wanting to hear about this until it became her story resonate with you?

QUESTIONS FOR TEENS:

- *Have you ever thought about your safety online?*
- *How might gender affect how a person thinks about online safety?*
- *How would you describe sextortion to someone who has not seen this film?*
- *Think about H.M. from the film (the girl that was sextorted by Steve Crofton/Daniel Harris).*
 - *What did Steve Crofton do to make her trust him?*
 - *How did Steve Crofton sextort H.M.?*
 - *How did the sextortion affect H.M.?*
 - *How did H.M. finally get help?*
 - *What do you think would have happened if she hadn't reached out for help?*
- *Think about the other sextortion stories in the film.*
 - *How are the stories similar? How are they different?*
 - *Looking back, what are the warning signs in these stories?*
- *What are examples of things you can do when someone you do not know communicates with you on the internet.*
- *What are examples of things you can do when someone asks you to do uncomfortable or inappropriate things online.*
- *What are examples of things you can do if you find that someone is trying to sextort you.*

In a 2017 study conducted by Thorn, 1 in 4 victims of sextortion were thirteen or younger when threatened and 2 in 3 victims were girls threatened before the age of sixteen. Source: *Sextortion: Summary Findings from a 2017 survey of 2,097 Survivors*.

https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Sextortion_Wave2Report_121919.pdf.

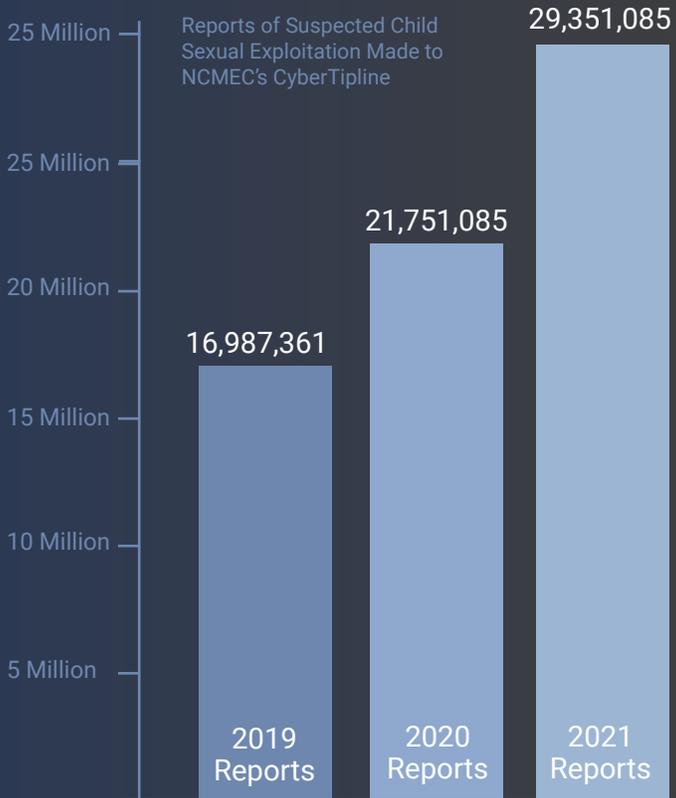
See also https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Sextortion_Wave2Report_121919.pdf

BY THE NUMBERS:

(NCMEC stats for 2019-2021 from EPK, 16.9 million in 2019 to 21.7 million in 2020 to 29 million CyberTipline reports in 2021) Source: NCMEC, 2022.

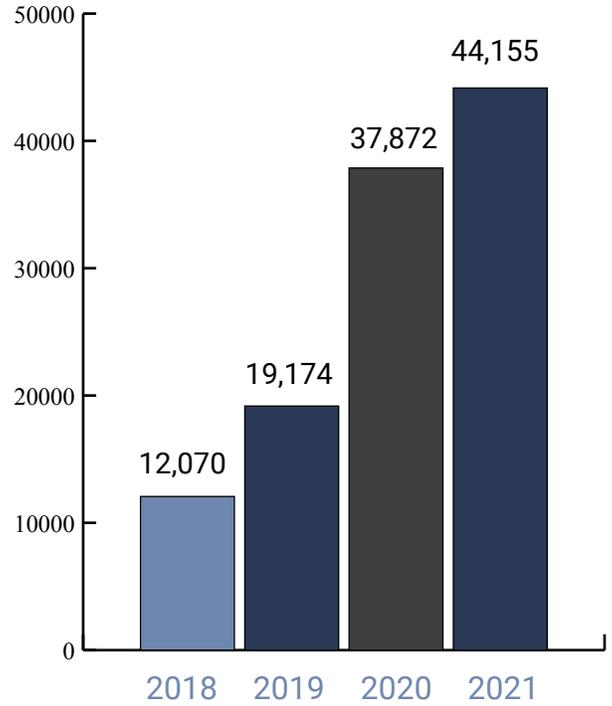


Overall Cyber Tipline Reports increased from 16.9 million in 2019 and 21.7 million in 2020 to 29.3 million in 2021, which included 44,856,209 video files and 39,939,298 image files.

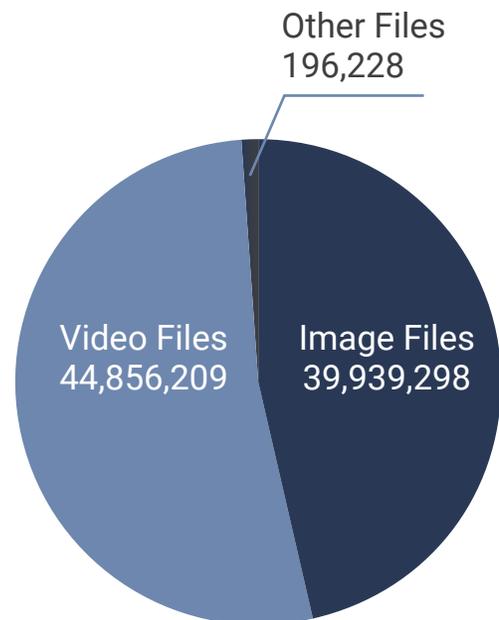


Source: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2022.

Reports of Online Enticement Made to NCMEC's CyberTipline



Files Included in 2021 Reports Made to NCMEC's CyberTipline



SEXTING

Taking and sharing nude/partially nude images is commonly referred to as “sexting”. There are many reasons someone may choose to share nudes; some people, especially those whose images don’t get forwarded around, might feel like it is a way to take a relationship to the next level, or it helps them feel more confident.

Young people will sometimes say that they are comfortable sharing a nude or partially nude image because they use an app that alerts them when someone has taken a screenshot of it. It’s important to tell young people that this “safeguard” isn’t much of a safeguard because there are ways to capture the image without the app alerting the other person. More importantly, it’s important to ask a young person, “So if you got an alert that someone had taken a screenshot of an image, what would you do? They already have the image and now you are not in control of what they do with it.” Walking young people through these kinds of hypothetical situations can help them think through what they would do in certain situations, but it also helps them build critical thinking skills. It is important to talk to your children about sexting and help them think through if they would ever send a sext- ideally long before anyone is asking them to send one. Ask them questions like, “What could happen if you send or forward a naked picture?” and “What are some ways a private photo sent to one person could be seen by others?” For more questions you can use to start a conversation about sexting with the teenagers in your life go to: NCMEC’s NetSmartz topic page all about sexting and sextortion.

Though the media may make it seem that all young people are engaging in sexting, research conducted in 2020 by Thorn found that only 17% of youth aged 13-17 have shared a nude photo or video of themselves. However, it is important to note that 15% of children aged 9 to 10 year olds reported that they have shared nude photos of themselves and 32% of children surveyed who identify as LGBTQ+ said that they have shared these images. Additionally, 25% of 13-17 year old children surveyed say they “have seen a nude photo or video of someone at your school or someone else in your community without that person’s knowledge.”

TALK ABOUT IT:

- What is sexting? How has the internet made it more risky for young people to explore relationships?
- How can adults help? What are the key facts we want our kids to know about sexting?
- In your opinion, what is the best way to explain the permanence of sharing these kinds of photos online? What happens after you hit send?
- How can we prevent teens from engaging in behavior that harms others such as pressuring someone else to send a nude image or re-sharing explicit images with others?

QUESTIONS FOR TEENS:

- *Has the ability to share nudes easily made it easier or more difficult for teens to have healthy relationships?*
- *What can happen if you send or share a private image of yourself online?*
- *Describe some things that can happen when private photos are circulated online?*
- *Do you think it is OK to forward private photos? Why or why not?*
- *What can you do if an explicit photo of someone you know is being circulated online?*

UNDERSTANDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

People who sexually victimize children online are acutely aware of the unique vulnerabilities of children. For example, they know that adolescents are seeking a sense of belonging and figuring out who they are. They want to feel liked, loved, and desirable. Of course, these are things that all humans need and want, but as adults we often forget how important these things were to us as teenagers. Forming an identity and then figuring out how to be in intimate relationships are the primary developmental tasks of adolescence and young adulthood- it is expected that these concerns will be paramount during these stages of life. It should also be expected that as adults we support the children and young people in our lives with guidance and support. We need to give them information about what to expect from a healthy intimate relationship. We should be explicit, for example, that healthy relationships do not include secrecy and control. In a healthy relationship, one person would not demand to know your whereabouts at all times or make you feel guilty if you are not available to talk online or play an online game with them at certain times. They would not ask you to keep any aspect of your relationship secret and they would not pressure you to do something you are not comfortable doing or could put you at risk. Your child's school may be able to help identify resources to address these topics in more detail with your child and the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention offers some information about preventing teen dating violence as well online here.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- How might a lack of knowledge or experience with mutually respectful, loving relationships increase a child's vulnerability to being sextorted?
- What are the red flags in a relationship that anyone should look out for?
- How can secrecy translate to control in a relationship?
- What are the ways that kids can take control of their online lives- and be leaders in preventing these crimes from happening to them and to their friends?

QUESTIONS FOR TEENS:

- *How would you describe a mutually respectful, loving relationship?*
- *If someone is asking you to keep secrets or to do things you don't want to, how would you describe the relationship?*
- *Who is in control in that relationship?*
- *If a relationship becomes unhealthy, what might make it hard to leave the relationship or tell someone what is happening? How can you support a friend who is in this situation?*
- *What are ways that young people can take control of their online lives and be leaders in preventing these crimes from happening to them and to their friends?*

Victims of sextortion face many barriers to reporting their abuse. They often feel embarrassed, ashamed, and blame themselves for the abuse. Many offenders understand this dynamic and use it to their advantage by telling the victims that if they speak up they will get in trouble and be embarrassed in front of everyone they know. Unfortunately, these tactics often work. According to the 2017 study by Thorn showed that 1 in 3 victims of sextortion never told anyone about the abuse mostly because of shame and embarrassment. According to the same study, unfortunately, the things children try to address sextortion on their own often do not work. Forty five percent of victims in the survey reported that the contact didn't stop after they blocked the person who was sextorting them. Sixty two percent complied with demands to try to make the threat stop, but sixty eight percent of victims reported that threats became more frequent after they complied with demands.

As Lindsey Olson (*Executive Director of the Exploited Children's Division at NCMEC*) says in the film it is important to regularly have conversations with children to let them know that they can come to you if something happens to them online, even if they feel like it is their fault. It's so important to have that conversation- to say:

"Even if something happens to you, I need you to come talk to me. It's not your fault. I'm not going to be mad at you. You're not going to be in trouble. I'm not going to take your phone away."

TRENDS IN ONLINE EXPLOITATION

Livestreaming's popularity exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, with much of the world utilizing livestreaming video conference tools to work, attend school, and connect with others during lockdowns. However, livestreaming, especially for children, may pose unique risks. For example:

Commenting:

Since livestream videos are often not moderated, anyone can leave rude or unwanted comments on a video. In CyberTipline reports of exploitation involving livestreams, some children have been coerced by commenters into undressing/exposing themselves on camera, engaging in self-harming behaviors like cutting, or sharing personal information that could be used to locate them in real life- like the name of their school, phone number, or even home address.

Gaming platforms

The interactive features that help gamers collaborate on teams and build communities can also be used by online offenders to groom and manipulate children. Given the demographics of online gaming continues to skew male, children in reports of online exploitation involving gaming are more likely to be male. The number of children exploited on gaming platforms is likely much higher than current reports indicate, as males face various barriers to reporting, such as social stigma, lack of support, or shame and embarrassment regarding the sexual content.

Payment

Though the primary motive of those engaged in sextortion is often to acquire more sexual content, there are instances when payment is the end goal. The extorters message the victims demanding payment, otherwise the images will spread. When victims pay, the blackmail almost never ceases. The extorters continue using the photos to pry more and more money from the victims. The involvement of law enforcement is the most effective method to end the extortion.

Recently, companies, or scammers posing as companies, have sprung up, claiming to be able to remove the explicit photos from the internet. Some are legitimate reputation management companies, others may be private investigators or web sleuths, and some may be scammers. Be careful if you choose to work with a private company to remove images online. NCMEC's CyberTipline team is a trusted flagger with the largest digital platforms and can work, at no-cost, with victims to remove their images from the internet.

False sense of security:

Livestream videos are usually not saved, unless the creator sets them to be saved, and that sense of impermanence, "this isn't being recorded," may lower the inhibitions of those in the videos. However, there is no way to guarantee that the video isn't being saved by a viewer.

For more information about Livestreaming see <https://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/topics/livestreaming>

Younger Child Victims

With more young children online than ever before, it follows that the number of young victims of online exploitation would likely increase. In 2020, reports of online enticement (the broader category of online sexual exploitation which includes sextortion), rose 97.5% from the previous year over 2019 levels. In a 2017 NCMEC analysis of online enticement reports, children as young as seven years old had been directly contacted by offenders online. NCMEC continues to see reports of young children being victimized since the 2017 analysis.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- How is letting young children play games online without supervision similar or different to letting kids play unattended on a playground?
- In what ways does the fact that children are often at home while interacting with others online provide a false sense of security to parents?
- How would you explain to a child or a teenager that sometimes people online are not who they say that they are and this could include online friends they know from social media or gaming?
- What are the online safety behaviors you would like to teach your kids as a result of seeing this film?

QUESTIONS FOR TEENS:

- *How can being online in your own home still present risks?*
- *Can live streaming be made permanent or shared with others? How?*
- *What does harassment or bullying look like on streaming platforms? What can be the impact of that harassment or bullying? How is that connected to sextortion?*
- *How do you figure out who is trustworthy online? If someone you are interacting with online makes you uncomfortable, what would you do and who could you talk to about it?*

PREVENTION

Ultimately, the most important thing families can do to prevent a child from becoming a victim of online exploitation is to help them understand healthy relationships and by making sure that that the child has at least one adult they are comfortable talking to about their relationships and online experiences. However, there are certain risk factors and red flags that can be monitored in the short-term while doing the long-term work to teach and model safe, respectful relationships.

Risk Factors and Red Flags

There are certain online behaviors that may put children at increased risk of falling victim to exploitation. These are behaviors such as lying about their age to access platforms which would otherwise not allow a child to communicate with older individuals, initiating contact with an unknown individual online, offering to provide sexually explicit images to the individual in exchange for something of value, or engaging in sexting.

The brightest red flag behaviors of a potential online offender include:

Sending unsolicited explicit content to others

Deliberately moving communication off of one platform and onto another, usually an encrypted or “secret” platform.

Either of those behaviors can be reported to NCMEC’s CyberTipline at cybertipline.org.

It can be difficult for adults to relate to the ways that children and teens use technology, particularly social media, gaming, and the ways children form relationships online. Focusing safety conversations on the behavior of a person, rather than who the person is can be a helpful approach for talking about healthy relationships of all kinds. Ask your child about their online friends, including questions about why they like spending time with them online and what makes them a good friend. Encourage them to come to you if they are confused or concerned by the behavior of a friend or a romantic partner, including online relationships. Help them build skills to be able to assert personal boundaries and stand up for themselves within relationships, online and offline. By focusing on a person’s behavior, not who they are, you are also helping to give your child important information they need to navigate all kinds of relationships safely. Unfortunately, as much as 60% of the time in a sextortion case the offender is actually someone the child knows so it is really important for children to understand that some behaviors are never acceptable, even if it is someone you know in real life.

Talking to Kids About Online Safety

Technology offers many benefits. Our goal should not be to scare children about the dangers lurking online, but rather to empower them to use technology safely. Children need information about digital risks and in an age-appropriate messaging about online trust, privacy, and consent. As they get older, they need more nuanced information about navigating social media and relationships online. You can find lots of helpful information about how to talk to kids about online safety across a wide variety of subjects, including sexting and sextortion, on NCMEC’s NetSmartz website.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- What barriers do adults face when trying to monitor or be involved in their child’s online life?
- How can an adult talk to a child or teenager about why they want to be involved in their online life?
- What are the challenges that teens face related to pressure to be constantly available to interact with friends online?
- What tools do teens need to be able to explain to their friends what dangers they are facing?
- How do we equip children to be the leaders in online safety?

QUESTIONS FOR TEENS:

- *How do you feel when your parents want to monitor your online activity? Do you talk with your parents about online safety?*
- *Do you find it challenging when you have friends that are constantly online?*
- *Do you ever feel like you need to warn friends about strangers they may be communicating with online?*
- *What should you do if someone wants to communicate with you using an encrypted platform?*

GET HELP

If a child tells you that they are being sextorted online you may experience a wide range of emotions including fear, worry, anger, and even frustration. You might be upset that your child didn't tell you sooner about what was happening or that they engaged in risky behavior online. All of these reactions are normal. However, it is important to remember that if your child comes to you to tell you about being victimized that they are doing a brave thing and putting a lot of trust in you. All people, and especially children, face many barriers to telling anyone about their victimization. If a child does tell you they have been sexually exploited this guide from NCMEC can help guide you navigate what comes next.

It is important for young people to know that there is help and support available to survivors of sextortion. Though offenders may make threats to your safety, they often cannot or won't follow through with these threats- they are much more likely to 'move on' to someone else. The best thing to do is to talk to a trusted adult so that you do not have to deal with it on your own. The adult can help you block and report the person who is sextorting you. You may experience a range of reactions as you consider reaching out for help- including anxiety to fear, to embarrassment, in addition to other strong emotions. Law Enforcement agencies and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) can help if you think that you or someone you know has been a victim of sextortion. You can make a report yourself to NCMEC.

Report online sexual exploitation or request to REMOVE explicit images from the internet (free service):
<https://www.Report.Cybertip.org>.

For survivor and family support from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, including information on how to remove explicit images online, find local therapists specializing in these issues, or for peer support, email
GetHelp@ncmec.org.

Find your local Child Advocacy Center at
<https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org>

Get resources for coping with sexual trauma:
<https://www.D2L.org>
<https://www.RAINN.org>
<https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org>

Additional NCMEC Resources

<https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/netsmartz/downloadable/tipsheets/sextortion-what-parents-should-know.pdf>

So You Need Some Help... (tip sheet)

<https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/netsmartz/downloadable/tipsheets/so-you-need-some-help.pdf>

Thorn Resources

Stop Sextortion - <https://www.thorn.org/sextortion/>

No Filtr - <https://nofiltr.org/>

Thorn for Parents - <https://parents.thorn.org/>

