




OPERATION UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

START TALKING:

A Guide to Keeping Children Safe Online



Technology is constantly changing, and children change with it.

New websites, apps, games, and gadgets offer new opportunities for exploiters to take advantage.

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THE ISSUE

For many children and teens, their online world is significantly intertwined with their offline world. Whether they're making friends, doing homework, being entertained, playing games, and sometimes even going to school, the Internet is a daily and essential part of their lives.

In the online world, there is capacity for a much broader reach than most in-person interactions, a power that can have both positive and negative consequences. There are risks every time someone opens a browser, starts a new chat, or downloads a new game. Online safety is about educating children and teens to help navigate those risks and know when to talk to someone they trust.

The number of active mobile devices in the world is expected to reach **17.62 billion by 2024**.

62% of survey respondents who said they had been sent sexually explicit material had received it on their mobile device.

(We Protect Global Alliance, 2021)



While settings and content blockers can be helpful, they can't ensure that children are completely protected online.

The most effective prevention is an educated child.

The best tool for keeping children safe is open, continuous conversation about online safety. It's up to parents and guardians to start this conversation so kids can navigate the online world safely and responsibly.

DID YOU KNOW?

Parents are not talking with their children enough about their digital activity.

Throughout a child's life, parents spend on average only **46 minutes** talking about online safety.

(Online Safety Report by Kaspersky, 2019)



THE ISSUE



1 in 3 children are first exposed to social media at age 5 or younger.



1 in 3 children can now expect to have an unwelcome sexual experience online before they turn 18.



The rate of online harms peaks when kids start using social media **at ages 11-12.**



The majority of children (87%) were first exposed to social media **before they were 13.**




43% of kids exposed to inappropriate sexual content online **were under 13.**



Kids with disabilities or special needs and LGBTQ+ kids are **2-4x more likely** to send explicit images of themselves than their peers.

(Parents Together, 2023)



Children ages 8-12 In the United States spend **4-6 hours a day** on average watching or using screens, and teens spend **up to 9 hours.**

(American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2020)

All of this time online with lack of education on how to be safe leaves them exposed.

WHAT IS ONLINE GROOMING?

GROOMING

(noun) /'gru:miŋ/

is the process where an offender builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or teen so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them.

(nspcc.org.uk)

Whatever issues a child may be experiencing, **the offender will pretend to be going through the same thing** or share specific knowledge about that issue. It may be body image issues, parents divorcing, recent death of a loved one or friend, or bullying.

“They look for victims who need someone or who are going through a difficult time. They pretend to be their friend and understand what they are going through. But the predator’s goal is to establish trust in order to manipulate and gain control over their victims.”

- O.U.R. Undercover Operator, former Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Investigator



Preventing grooming can’t be done through a single conversation, by telling kids “don’t,” or by just restricting access to technology.

Remember, grooming can look a lot like making a good friend—it might not be clear it’s happening for a long period of time, especially from a child’s perspective.

It’s important to know that a predator’s objective may be to meet your child face-to-face in order to exploit them.

However, some predators keep the relationship only online. They use different tactics to convince the child to engage in a sexual act, whether that be sharing sexual images or engaging in sexual activity on a video call.

Child sex predators can be someone familiar or a complete stranger. They may identify as any gender. They often disguise their identity and age behind fake online profiles.

They target any age, gender, and social or cultural background.

It may be difficult for children to understand that there are people using disguises online. An older man may pretend to be someone their age or someone that goes to a nearby school.

Even if a child knows they are communicating with an adult, the age gap may instill fear into the child to comply with the predator's requests. Some predators start by enticing a child to share personal information and then later use it against the child to coerce them into sexual activity.

Grooming is a process that can take place over the course of just a few hours or several years.

A groomer will create profiles on apps or games that children use in order to gain their trust and build a friendship. Conversation often starts through comments, direct messages or chatrooms.

If initial contact begins on a public comment or forum, a predator will likely try to contact the child in a direct message next.

Part of the grooming process is isolating the child or teen in a private online space and then slowly working to manipulate or force them into engaging in a sexual act.



ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

If a child or teen feels lonely at home or at school, they often turn to social media or games to connect with others or disconnect from their pain.



54% of minors believe online grooming is a common experience for kids their age.

(Thorn, 2022)



1 in 3 minors consider a connection they made online among their closest friends.



2 in 3 9-12 year-olds interact with unfamiliar adults online.

1 in 6 9-12 year-olds have had romantic or sexual conversations with an online-only contact.

(Thorn, 2022)

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The best tool for keeping children safe is open, continuous conversation about online safety. It's up to parents and guardians to start this conversation so kids can navigate the online world safely and responsibly.

POPULAR APPS & RISKS

If your child has it, you should have it.

That simple principle can go a long way in protecting your children. If you don't know a lot about a certain game or app, download it on your phone and look through the different features. Assume that all apps have messaging capabilities. This will help you better understand potential opportunities for predators to contact your child. Examples of messaging, dating, and photo apps are shown on the next page.



POPULAR APPS

THE MAJORITY OF TEENS USE:



YOUTUBE



TIKTOK



INSTAGRAM



SNAPCHAT

Teen use of Facebook has dropped sharply since 2014-2015.

Teen girls are more likely than boys to use TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.

Teen boys are more likely to use:

(PEW Research Center, 2022)



TWITCH



REDDIT



YOUTUBE

MESSAGING



DISCORD



SIGNAL



**GOOGLE
HANGOUTS**



GROUPME



WHATSAPP



KIK



VIBER



WECHAT

Child predators often try to take online conversations with minors to a private messaging app to avoid public suspicion. It is common for them to initiate a conversation on one app and then ask the minor to switch to another app for privacy. This way it is easier for the predators to ask for explicit pictures. These apps have also been used to buy, share, and trade images of child sexual abuse material.

DATING



TINDER



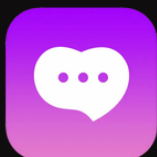
BUMBLE



HINGE



YUBO



KASUAL



CHAT + DATE



SPOT A FRIEND



GRINDR

While dating apps should be 18+, some are labeled as 17+ or don't have minimal age verifications. This means teens can easily join the app by lying about their age. A teen seeking connection can sign up, start messaging adults, and develop unsafe or inappropriate relationships with them. Some apps are even made for meeting in person for sexual experiences, putting teens in immediately dangerous situations. Even when these interactions remain online, private messaging and photo functions open doors for exploitation and enticement.

SECRET PHOTO VAULTS & BROWSERS

Multiple applications and websites allow users to hide their pictures and messages. These features are accessible to any user regardless of age and allow kids and teens to hide inappropriate messages and chats from concerned parents or friends. While children sometimes do this out of a desire for independence and privacy, predators take advantage of these features to keep their exploitation a secret.



**CALCULATOR
VAULT**



KEEPSAFE



**PRIVATE PHOTO
VAULT**

- These “vaults” are on photo apps where users can make photos hidden so they are only accessible via passcode.
- Apps such as the “fake calculator” allow users to disguise the application itself, making it easy to hide sexually explicit photos right on their home screen.
- These apps encrypt messages and can even automatically delete messages, making it difficult to track a child's incoming and outgoing messages.
- Kids can erase search and website history on private browsers, making it easy to hide online activity and communication.

YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

The nature of some social platforms and apps is to make it as easy as possible to share private information or locations. It is important that children and teens understand what is safe to share and what should be kept private.

There is an elevated risk on more visual-based apps for children and teens to broadcast home locations and clues to places they frequently hang out. If this information is public, predators can start understanding what vulnerabilities a child has and what they enjoy doing, making it easier to make a connection with them over a chat or direct message.

On some apps, users can post stories that will only appear for 24 hours. Remind your children and teens that even though stories may seem temporary, other users can screenshot anything they post.



Anything you post publicly online becomes a part of your digital footprint. Online predators may search for more information about their target, so it is important to turn on privacy settings to keep your child protected.

Here are some tips to manage a digital footprint:

Use privacy settings to safeguard your personal photos and videos.

Remove any content that may misrepresent you.

Delete old accounts, especially public accounts.

Look through what others have shared about you.

Determine what you are comfortable with others sharing about you online.

Ask others for permission before sharing their photo publicly.

Avoid posting photos that show your address or typical schedule.

POSTING INNOCENT IMAGES



Your digital footprint includes any information shared online by you or about you.

The comments you post, videos you share, and photos you are tagged in are part of a public data pool. Even if you delete a photo, it may still exist on the app's server or as a screenshot on someone else's computer.



Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) contains many different media categories. Those graphic images of "child sexual abuse" are what we most commonly see or hear about in the media. Sex offenders photographing or recording the sexual abuse of their victims and then sharing and distributing that content can be found in news headlines almost daily.



When it comes to CSAM, online predators are not only using the internet to find child victims to groom, manipulate and eventually exploit and abuse.

Offenders are just as actively searching for and downloading innocent images of children from public social media profiles belonging to unknowing parents and grandparents.



Imagery might include nude or partially nude images of extremely young children innocently playing together, modeling photo shoots, sporting events or dancing. These are often found bundled together on peer-to-peer file sharing networks and the dark web and marketed as child erotica or nudism.

This content can be just as sought after as graphic sexually explicit content, sometimes even more, as it may not always be classified as illegal content.

So, before you upload and post, make sure you know your audience, understand your privacy settings, and have thoroughly reviewed the content.



As a former Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) investigator and current undercover operator for O.U.R., I have interviewed hundreds of offenders and have seen first-hand the destruction caused by these types of predators. Their ability to identify, manipulate and control victims is powerful.

"The last thing that we, as parents, need to do is allow offenders unrestricted access to our social media profiles."

(O.U.R. Undercover Operator, former Internet Crimes Against Children [ICAC] Investigator, 2022)

IDENTIFY A FAKE ACCOUNT

The following tips are from an O.U.R. Undercover Operator who specializes in identifying internet crimes against children.

DID YOU KNOW?

The FBI estimates between **500,000-750,000 predators online** on a given day.

(FBI.gov, 2011)



Social media was designed for social interaction, but unfortunately it has become a playground for bad actors who are looking to take advantage of the vulnerable. Here are four steps you can take when looking into who your child is interacting with online or to consider before letting your child have access to social media.



1. FRIENDS CHECK

Make sure the profile has a normal number of friends or followers. Profiles with under 100 friends are highly suspicious, especially if the account allegedly belongs to a teen.

Checking for friends is an essential step but won't always ensure the account is safe. Some accounts receive followers by impersonating celebrities or other influencers. Make sure to check other factors (listed below) on profiles before following or subscribing.

FAKE TIKTOK PROFILE EXAMPLE

- Fake TikTok accounts may impersonate TikTok users with large followings.
- They reach out to smaller accounts with the offer to increase their likes and followers.
- These fake accounts often ask for payment in exchange for a shoutout to help users increase their following.
- But once these scammers receive payment, the fake accounts disappear or they block the users that paid them.

(redpoints.com, 2023)



2. PHOTO CHECK

Profiles without a profile photo are almost always spam or fake accounts. Profiles with none or only a few posted photos of themselves in social situations should raise your alarm.



3. REVERSE IMAGE CHECK

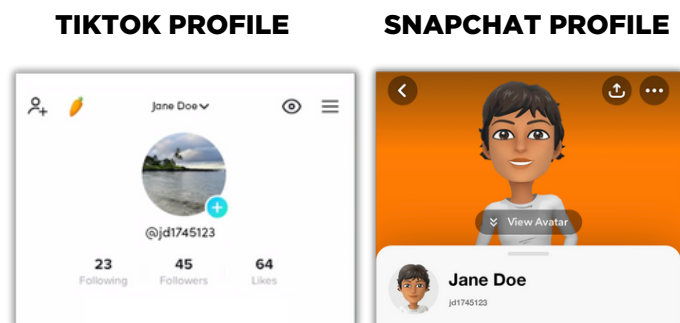
If a profile has only a few photos or you feel as though the account may be suspicious or fake, a quick reverse image search of some of the photos may be useful. This can be done by downloading or saving the published photos. Once saved, navigate to www.google.com/imghp. This is Google's Image Search.



Drag the photo into the Google search bar or click the “browse” button and navigate to the saved photo. Within seconds, Google will return results if that photo is found elsewhere on the internet. If the photo is visible on other accounts using a different name or appears to be from a commercial website, the profile is most likely a fake account.

4. USERNAME CHECK

Profile names and account usernames can be different. Users can display a name on their profile different from their actual account username. Once an account's unique username is identified, a quick Google search of that username may lead you to other social media accounts or to comments/complaints related to suspicious activity.



When searching usernames on Google, be sure to place the username within quotes (“username.123” or “@username.123” depending on the social media network). If the username search reveals other profiles with different photos of different people, then it's likely a fake account.

START TALKING:

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR ONLINE SAFETY



It's never too late to begin a conversation with your children.

A child is unlikely to recognize if they are being groomed. If someone has threatened or manipulated them online, they might be less likely to speak to an adult about what is going on. Creating an environment of honesty and no judgment can help your child feel comfortable bringing their concerns to you.

Consider opening the conversation by asking some questions to gauge their level of understanding:

What are some of your favorite apps or games?

Has anyone made you feel unsafe or uncomfortable online?

Do you know what online grooming is?

Let them ask you questions, too.

Listen to their answers and experiences without interruption.

It's important to show that you are also listening to them and value what they're telling you. Ask open-ended questions that don't require a yes or no answer. This gives them the opportunity to tell you what they think.

What is the difference between people we only know online and people we know offline?

Has anyone asked you to keep your relationship a secret or made you feel like some things needed to be kept a secret?

Do you know where the Report and Block buttons are on different apps?

Who can you come to for help if something worries or upsets you online?

Consider these tips on how to navigate these conversations:



1. START SMALL

Conversations based on fear may send the wrong message to your child.

Start with having small conversations often about the topic of online safety to help them feel safe talking to you about this subject. Ask questions about what they learn in school about online safety or what rules their friends have and how they differ.



2. EXPLORE TOGETHER

Be curious and sit down with your child to explore different apps and websites together.

Ask them to show you which apps they spend the most time on, what they like about the apps, and if anything ever makes them feel uncomfortable. Exploring together can foster natural discussion or teaching opportunities.



3. EMPOWER THEM WITH TOOLS

Empower your children with tools to feel safe navigating the Internet.

It is likely that they spend time alone navigating different apps and websites, so it is important that they have an action plan for different situations they may come across.

Talk about what personal details are inappropriate to share with people they don't know. Show them the block buttons and exit buttons on their favorite apps and **let them know that they can always come to you for help.**

Teach them how to react if someone new messages them online or sends them a friend request.





5. WALK THROUGH POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Not everyone is who you think they are.

It is easy for predators to create accounts that disguise their real identity. Help your child understand what to look out for.

Here are some questions to guide discussion:

Do you have mutual friends with this person? Do any of your friends know them in real life?

How many followers does this person have? Does it seem realistic that this is a real person?

If the number “following” is significantly more than “followers,” this can mean it’s a fake account.

Are there any inappropriate pictures on this person’s account?

Do you share the same interests as this person? Does that mean they are safe?



6. ESTABLISH AGE-APPROPRIATE GUIDELINES

After taking this training, determine the best guidelines and rules to implement for your children. It is important to establish clear boundaries and rules, while also keeping open communication so that your child feels free to safely explore and play.

If your child wants an app, download it on your phone first and look for chat features, safety features, and how to turn off locations and other features that may publicize personal information.

Although there are several safety features on most electronic devices, **the best prevention is an educated child.**

LEARN MORE

Join us in making a difference in the fight against human trafficking. Visit ourrescue.org, follow O.U.R. on social media, or click the videos below to learn more and be part of the change.



BECOME A O.U.R. VOLUNTEER

Interested in volunteering your time and skills? Create your account with Operation Underground Railroad to join the volunteer hub and stay up to date with volunteer opportunities.

SIGN UP NOW

SPREAD AWARENESS

Showcase your commitment to spreading the word about online safety by proudly wearing the O.U.R. online safety training t-shirt.

BUY NOW

Parents spend, on average, **only 46 minutes** talking to their children about online safety throughout a child's life.

(Kaspersky, 2019)

