



In an era of  
Catfishing,  
There's a lot you  
can do as a  
Parent.

# Protecting Your Children from Internet Predators

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**P**arents are aware of the dangers of the internet, of that I am certain. We've had enough news in recent years about how the internet is abused, and of horrible cases that result from it, not to be aware.

But to think that it could happen to *your kid*, especially your daughter, is often unthinkable to most parents. The unimaginable is relegated to the back corner of our consciousness, as our brains fight the possibility. However, the most recent (2022) 'catfishing' and 'grooming' of a 15-year old in Riverside (CA), killing of grandparents and mother in the throes of abducting this adolescent girl, should bring the issue of "*it could happen to anyone*" back into full awareness.

Thus, this effort, among others already out there to help you, the parent, raise the bar on understanding how your children interact with the internet, and what you can do to protect them.

To underscore the severity of the matter, consider the Internet Watch Foundation's (UK) 2021 report, which validated 252,000 known cases of sexual exploitation and investigated 1,800,000 reports of a minor being wooed by online predators that year alone.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, during the height of the pandemic, the (US) National Center for Missing and Exploited Children recorded a record 21.7 million suspected cases of child sexual exploitation on the internet.<sup>2</sup>

What I cover here aims to help educate you about the risks of online grooming and predators; what you need to do to establish better safety in children's internet use, in establishing boundaries that are necessary to protect your children from online predators and their becoming victims.

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<sup>1</sup> The Internet Watch Foundation reports that 2021 was the worst year on record for online sexual abuse, predators "at an industrial scale" combing the internet for vulnerable minors. The report also mentions that the age of exploitation has dropped from an average of mid-teens down to tweens and younger, with those as young as 7-10 being exploited. See <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/>.

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2.21.20 Report, at [www.missingkids.org](http://www.missingkids.org).

## What are we talking about?

Terms are everything in this arena, so here are preliminaries you need to understand and remember:

***Child grooming.*** Sometimes called “*online grooming*,” is when an online predator begins a premeditated plan—a series of carefully orchestrated steps—to first gain your child’s attention and eventual trust online. Ultimately, child grooming turns into one of many forms of sexual exploitation, many times resulting in some form of sexual abuse.

Of course, child groomers don’t use their real identities: They present themselves as slightly older children or adolescents, any representation among myriad tried and tested that may work to gain the friendship of your child. They ask simple questions, ask about the social media your child may be using; agree on how ‘cool’ some of their posts are; all to find the wormhole into your child’s trust. Eventually, becoming ‘friends.’ This is called ‘*catfishing*,’ which means the process of luring someone into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona.

At some point, the groomer may disclose they are “a little older” than they said, and gain further ‘respect’ by being a couple of years more advanced in experience. They may ask about your kid’s personal life, and how they get along with you, the parents; the family. They engage in “chats” to further investigate how your child is being—or *not* being—supervised on the internet.

Eventually they will send a doctored photo of themselves, or a facsimile fake of what they are supposed to look like—and ask for a photo of your child. And this is where it starts to really turn into exploitation.

***Sexual exploitation.*** This is the term that parents push to the back of consciousness: It’s too unimaginable that your child could be subjected to it. But here it is:

“Sexual exploitation is taking advantage of victims not being able to give consent, involving sexual activity of any sort with a minor, including coercion; making threats, exposing a minor to sexually explicit material, or requesting from a minor any suggestive sexual material involving them. Exploitation is abuse.” (*American Psychological Association*, [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org).)

At some point the predator will become more extreme, when they feel your child’s trust is secure enough that they will do what the predator asks. They may ask for nude pictures, or if the child is older, of sexually explicit photos or videos.

In the more extreme cases, the predator may work to get a physical meet-up with your child. This is the beginning of many child abductions, particularly mid- to older teen girls, which are then enslaved into prostitution.

I understand: It’s unfathomably disturbing to think that *your kid* would be/come so vulnerable, especially when reared in a Christian household, going to church, having Christian friends, maybe even going to a Christian school. But it happens, and it happens more often than we think. Here are some of the reasons:

***Childhood and adolescence today are more difficult and “lonely.”*** We’ve seen the effects of significant changes in the last three-four years in children’s and

adolescent's lives. This generation has—and still is—going through very tough times resulting from many factors, but most of all from unbridled use of social media, the isolation brought about by a pandemic, the loss of friends and relationships in the real, physical world of people; and the substitution of much of their angst for internet connections, “friends,” and online postings that boost social capital and soothe the psyche.

Parents may have thought that isolation and lack of exposure to people, particularly older teens, may have been “a good thing,” keeping children safe(r) by staying at home or not doing in-person social activities. If isolation and aloneness haven't triggered corollary parental concerns for internet safety, then chances are that your kids have been much more vulnerable to all sorts of exposures during these times: Screen time among youth has increased—47% among 11–13 year-olds, and 67% among 14–17 year-olds since 2019.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, these tweens and teens were spending more than four hours a day online.

## **The earlier the better. And it's never too late.**

***Start setting boundaries.*** Consider that age 10.7 is now (2022) the average age when most kids get their first phone.<sup>4</sup> Most teens and Gen Z'ers have never been without a personal smartphone. **Conversations about internet interactions, best practices and threats, however, should start well before they ever get a phone!** Detective Robert Olson, from Riverside's Child Exploitation Team, gives us an important word of advice:

As soon as you put a digital device in your child's hand, no matter what age that is...you need to get the child into the habit that **the device is not theirs, it's yours.** And you're going to look at it any time you want. The conversation about safety should develop as children get older, and include topics like cyberbullying, sexting, catfishing, and even sexual extortion. Parents need to understand these topics and the many ways they can play out, from social media apps to video games to simple communications. (LA Times, “How to Help Keep Children Safe Online: Talk Early and Often,” by Toobey, G. and S. Lin, In *Opinion*, December 4, 2022)

Beginning with the notion that any device “*isn't theirs*” is a significant start. If “*It's too late for that, Vince,*” I think *that* thinking is in error: Even if teens have been “given” a phone for a gift (which I think is a *bad idea from inception—to call it a “gift,” which implies it's then theirs*), that gift, like a car or anything else they haven't paid for as an adult, is really “on loan.” Clarifying this to a teen early on takes away the idea that they can “do” with the gift whatever they want sans parental interference. “After the fact” non-ownership needs to be also stressed, not as a threat but as a fact of life and as a parental right. Don't give up parental rights because a device is “theirs” to use. They are a minor. You have every right to monitor *your* device(s) as much as you have a right to monitor a teen's driving *with your car*. It's a matter of safety, not rights.

***Explain the risks.*** Moreover, a child—tween, teen—should be taught to be aware of how people can deceive and be deceived through internet media. These age-appropriate conversations are “must have” for parents, and “must repeats” with enough frequency to let the child know that not only what you are saying is *serious*, but that you are reiterating for their welfare. I've had teens of my own, so I get how difficult this can become in a culture when teens are privileged like adults.

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<sup>3</sup> Reported on Statista.com. Internet data gathered and reported as of July, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> *Stanford Medicine*, November 21, 2022. <https://med.stanford.edu>.

From there, all recommendations given to parents suggest these conversations need to be had *often*, in non-threatening and “depersonalized” ways — which means not acting like a bully parent, but rather in adult-toned conversations repeating the ground rules and restating the risks. And this includes their reporting what may feel weird or risky coming from anyone—friends they know in fact, or ‘friends’ they’ve made on the internet. If they don’t feel comfortable talking to you as a parent about their “friends,” give them options to talk to other family members whom they trust.

Some families with different age children form a “remember and refresh” group time where they discuss and recall how they are interacting with social media. Older ones are tasked with explaining to younger ones what to watch out for (like friend requests or messages from someone they don’t know; why picture posting can be dangerous); also how to enjoy media safely.

All ideas, here and elsewhere center on the notion that an early start to boundaries, and an early set of conversations about safety, are much in order these days. Remedially, consistent conversations about safety are also important to continue as your children enter teenhood and beyond.

***Monitoring.*** This is a tough word. It automatically implies lack of trust for many who hear it, particularly young people. But we are talking just the opposite here. Monitoring means trusting that parents’ actions are always well intended and protective; that they have the right to know and to be trusted. We are talking about setting *boundaries* with children and continuing those boundaries with adolescents; reiterating clear expectations everyone understands. That includes parents having the right to determine when devices are used, how they are used, and for how long. Parents have a right to know who their kids are relating to in cyberspace, as much as they have the right to know who they are playing with down the block. Giving a kid a smartphone and not setting boundaries is about the same as giving a child a box of chocolates and saying “*have at it.*” Eventually what is good becomes a bad.

Whether it’s when devices need to be turned off, prohibiting certain apps, or using parental control software (like *Bark* or *Kaspersky Safe Kids*), or reviewing device activity, it’s your responsibility to ensure that your child/adolescent is protected to the best degree possible. The digital age requires that you also enable your child with *some* sense of control, like together setting parental control software so they know you aren’t prohibiting *everything*. All this isn’t about privacy, it’s about security. Children and especially adolescents will more readily comply with your guidance and respect your authority if you engage them in the process from the beginning.

While we are at it, here are some apps to watch carefully, even restrict in many cases (and I’ll give you reasons after the list): *WhatsApp, Omegle, Fortnite, Kik Messaging, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, TikTok, Likee*. I know, immediately you’ve reacted to some on this list, like *Instagram, or TikTok*, which are immensely popular with younger folk. The fact is, that many predators *hide in these particular apps* because they know a lot of kids use these apps to connect with each other. What predators like are apps that appeal to the younger generation, that are fairly commonplace, popular in use by them. Groomers often use these platforms since they require no personal authentications and thus, false identities can be had for the taking.

## Signs to watch for, actions to take.

Studies and people in the know come to the same conclusions: it can be very difficult for parents to detect online grooming, or even outright child sexual abuse when it's happening. Children, adolescents, aren't going to bring up a conversation about a situation that would make them feel awkward, so it's up to you to check in, to ask, to start that conversation if you have any suspicions. Here are possible signs that something isn't right:

- Spending more than normal time on their devices, glued to their phones
- Being secretive and not wanting to talk about technology
- Hiding their phones or tablets when you come around—and that includes blacking out screens or muting phones
- Acting abnormally, meaning showing signs of irritation or distraction, frustration, being too quiet. In some adolescents, outbursts of anger when these are not normative for them
- Changes in grades, lower scores, for reasons you can't figure out and they won't commit to trying to explain (what's going on)
- New "things" that your child/adolescent has that you can't explain where they came from or how they got them (and they make up stories about when they received them, and from whom)
- You discover they have plans to meet someone you don't recognize as their friend; even though the language in texts or emails don't seem to indicate 'anything wrong,' but you don't know the 'friend' or person

***What you should do.*** If you have suspicions, investigate further. If you can't reach reasonable conclusions, it's not inappropriate or "too soon" to call local law enforcement or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The Center has a CyberTipline that connects you to people who can help you decipher events, and if necessary, take action. Additionally,

- Never delete evidence even if you are in a panic. Close the device (laptop, phone, etc.)
- Follow local authorities' advice — These may suggest ways of blocking the predator
- And this step is important – Take time to talk to your child/adolescent and reassure them that they did nothing wrong(!) Children or tweens especially become significantly confused when there's this kind of exposure to predation.
- Open and honest conversations about what has been occurring may be necessary to prompt. By all means, keep your cool. Don't accuse! Don't sound like in a panic.

***Resources out there.*** Fortunately, we live in a country that recognizes and attempts to intercept, prevent, predatory crimes on the internet, especially the sexual exploitation of minors. Two numbers to have handy are, The **National Child Abuse Hotline** at 800-4-A-CHILD (800-422-4453), and the **National Sexual Assault Hotline** at 800-656-HOPE (800-656-4673). Both numbers offer helpful resources to families in thwarting, investigating, and helping to resolve abuse cases.

## The Bottom Line.

Am sure you already know the bottom line: It's a hard fact of life that we, as parents, have to redouble efforts to keep our children, our adolescents, as protected as possible. At the same time, "the bottom line here" also infers we *educate*, we *empower* our children with the appropriate

knowledge to discern, to make good judgments, and to be free enough to ask a parent when they don't know, don't understand, or don't quite trust their intuitions. Give them the language they need; they aren't too young! Give them the tools that they need by fostering relational openness and trust in you! Above all else, entrust them to God each morning, and pray for them each evening!

Parent, here's added information to read which will address the question, "What kind of person does this type of crime? Log on to: <https://smart.ojp.gov> and look up "Chapter 2: Etiology of Adult Sexual Offending" by Susan Faupel and Roger Przybylski. You can download the report, and get a great understanding of "who" "does" "this"! The more you know, the better protected your kids!

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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