

When Children Are at Risk of Sextortion

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As technology rapidly changes and children have increased access to the Internet from younger ages, there are extensive avenues for their victimization. In particular, there is a growing number of online sexual exploitation and extortion cases amongst children and teens, referred to as sextortion.^{1,2}

What is sextortion? Sextortion is a federal crime. It occurs when an adult coerces a youth to produce and send sexually explicit images or videos over the Internet; then, the adult threatens to distribute the material unless the victim complies with their demands, which can include requests ranging from additional explicit material to in-person sexual actions.³ Initially performed through the vehicle of the Internet, sextortion can be relentless. Manipulators can groom and coerce 24 hours a day from any geographic location, and are constantly patrolling gaming systems, social media platforms and chat services looking for vulnerable youth. What can differ from in-person grooming is the faster speed at which online manipulation can occur.

How is it done? Scenarios often involve the adult pretending to be another youth. They might gain knowledge about the child based on the youth's existing social media footprint (linked accounts, usernames, images, posts) and use it to begin conversations. They comment on how cute or attractive youth is, which can quickly escalate to asking for sexual content, sharing their own explicit images for reciprocation, teaching the youth about sexually explicit matters or [other coercion tactics](#). Similar to other types of child sexual abuse, the perpetrator may threaten to hurt loved ones to get what they want. One [case](#) involved a man who threatened to expose compromising material to the victims' entire lists of friends.⁴

Children as victims: It is easier than we realize for youth and teens to become victims of sextortion and other types of sexual abuse. There is an increased sense of safety when one is in a familiar environment, such as a home or school. When we feel safe, we are more likely to share images of ourselves, speak freely about what we are going through and share personal details using the seeming anonymity of a technological device, which is more like a flimsy mesh screen than the protective wall children envision it to be. It is also a given they will not always make the best decisions because the rational, decision-making part of their brains are [not fully developed](#).

As easy as it is to become a victim, it is incredibly difficult to then share what is going on. The youth often initially feels flattered by the attention given to them and cannot find a way out. The effects of sextortion among young people are numerous and devastating. Youth feel shame, anxiety, depression, embarrassment, fear and helplessness. They do not trust that anything can actually be done to help. The abuser has told them that they have covered their tracks and are not "catchable." The youth fears, justifiably so, that they will get into trouble and their lifeline of the Internet might be revoked, which both become strong impediments to disclosure.

Is anything good about the Internet? Not everything about the Internet is bad; it can be a wonderful source of information, a fantastic platform for good causes, a social connector across the globe, it can give young people a voice-the list of positives is never ending. However, as deftly described by the FBI, the "*Internet connects your kids to the world. ...Do you know who in the world is connecting to them?*"⁵ Our relationship with technology grows each day and the truth is that children and youth will have unsupervised⁶ moments without us there to protect them. We need to expect this and compensate both by managing their access to the Internet and also

communicating specific information to them.

Managing the youth's Internet access. Sometimes managing the risks of the Internet for the young people in our care can seem overwhelming, especially if we do not feel technologically savvy. You are not alone, and there are tangible things that you can learn to help keep people safe:

- Manage the youth's access as much as possible with appropriate limits per the environment (i.e., a parent will have much more authority to limit a teen's usage and access to specific content, while an organization/school/program has the ability per technology use agreements to limit the operation of a technological device during an activity).
- Perform frequent device or network status checks (i.e., parents should conduct frequent content checks of devices; organizations should monitor networks and activity on loaned devices).
- Install monitoring and filtering software to help identify issues, like the one described [here](#).⁷

Communicate the following information to the youth in your care for when (note: not "if") something unsafe comes their way. As much as we give youth enhanced responsibility and opportunities for independence in their journey to adulthood, we still must educate them on these types of risks. It is essential that we speak regularly about online activities and risk, and that we give them tools to communicate with us as safe adults:

- You have a right to be safe from abuse, exploitation and sextortion.
- Regardless of how well you think you may know someone online, or even in person, never share a naked, compromising or sexually explicit image of yourself or anyone else. Even if it is not an actual image, someone could be recording your interaction. Not everyone is who they say they are, and online perpetrators will do and say anything to try and gain your trust.
- Nothing is private on the Internet, despite promises made by the person, application, program or site.
- Once an image is captured and posted, or shared, it could be available, in some form, forever. But, please do not let this be a deterrent to speaking up if you know that your content is already "out there." There is always [hope](#)!
- You must tell an adult if you (or even a friend), is being victimized or threatened via the Internet/technology, even if feels like you did something wrong. If you've been exploited, it's not your fault. Perpetrators are counting on you to feel too ashamed or worried to tell anyone who can help. If it's being done to you, it's likely being done to others, too. Try not to panic. You do not have to deal with it on your own; there are people who can help.
- To make it stop and prevent it from hurting others, you must have the courage to do the right thing and report:
 - You can always call your local FBI office, or call toll-free at 1-800-CALL-FBI
 - You can also make a CyberTipline report to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at report.cybertip.org or call their 24-hour hotline at 1-800-843-5678
 - For immediate danger or emergencies, call 911