Protecting God's Children for Adults

Increased Online Exploitation of Children Expected During Crises

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Ongoing crises that happen in our world tend to not only have direct effects of the individual crisis itself, but there can be other varied types of indirect, long-lasting effects, too. For example, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis continues to spur additional consequences that are incredibly challenging for the protection of children. A particularly alarming one was recently raised from *WePROTECT Global Alliance*.[1] *WePROTECT* is an international organization consisting of major companies (such as Apple, Microsoft and Facebook), civic organizations including Save the Children and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, as well as over 95 countries (including the United States). The central mission of *WePROTECT* is to end child sexual exploitation online.

WePROTECT identifies specific factors resulting from the effects of the global pandemic that have already caused a substantial increase in online child sexual exploitation. For example, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has seen a 106% increase in reports of suspected online child sexual exploitation since March of 2019. Another organization in the UK that monitors online chat rooms used by abusers reports that offenders are sharing new ideas on how to exploit children during the pandemic lockdowns.[2]

We know from experience that criminals are quick to adjust the way they operate to new circumstances. The new, unusual circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are no different. These new modes of soliciting children have resulted in a surge in attempts by offenders to contact children through social media. There has also been a significant increase in the downloading and file sharing of child sexual abuse material of all kinds. As a result, the number of public complaints through hotlines to law enforcement have also been increasing in some areas.[3]

The pandemic has resulted in everyone, including children, spending more time online. In addition, the need for livestreaming classes and other services has dramatically expanded our familiarity with "real time" video communication. As a result of these changes and the current uncertainty in general, many children may be extremely stressed, which can increase their vulnerability to child abusers who are taking advantage of the current situation.

Unsupervised Internet activity can increase children's risk of being exposed to online sexual exploitation. As caring adults, families, and communities who care about the welfare of children, we must remain on high alert and increase our own diligence in monitoring the online activities of children and modeling appropriate behavior. That may be difficult to do as some parents are still working from home and there may not

be many programs or activities available for their children outside the home. Implementing basic safety standards, such as using monitoring software and having frequent conversations with children regarding technology safety can help keep children safe when they are online. Caring adults involved in the lives of children may also contribute to reducing others' household stress by checking in frequently and identifying where burdens can be lightened.

Offenders are also affected by the pandemic's impact. While it is certainly no excuse, their stress levels are raised as well, which can lead to them seeking and performing more illegal activities online. Offenders often do not have any other outside social support systems, and this factor alone results in a higher risk for children.[4] This means several factors have coalesced to create unusually high risk—increased stress and therefore vulnerability in children, higher stress on offenders, as well as increased stress on parents who have more to do, yet less time and assistance in order to accomplish everything. These conditions allow for the possibility of an unfortunate increase for online child sexual exploitation.

VIRTUS has always championed taking measures to ensure that children are safer in person, and online. In addition, *WePROTECT* has echoed these steps, and provided additional ones,[5] in order to provide the best possible opportunity to protect children during this time. For example:

- Talk with your children about the risks of online activity
- Stay involved in their digital world—know where they are going online and oversee these sites and apps
- Know who they are connecting with online—people are not always who they seem
- Use all the privacy and security settings available
- Block and report[6] anyone that makes the youth, or you, uncomfortable (you should report any exploitative online material to https://report.cybertip.org/). You can also report directly in the app or website for elements that are against the policy.

Raising the bar on diligence can be difficult at a time when we are inclined to loosen up due to stress and limited options. However, research and data tell us that the increased online risk to our children is not likely to disappear as things return to some semblance of "normal." It is up to us, as caring adults and protectors of children, to remain vigilant, to follow steps designed to provide safety, and to each do our part in protecting children and youth in all environments.

References:

1. *WePROTECT Global Alliance* Intelligence Brief: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, April 13, 2020, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5630f48de4b00a75476ecf0a/t/5ebc58d038eb072b909874ca/1589401809129/Impact+of+COVID-19+on+Online+Child+Sexual+Exploitation.pdf

2. Ibid at 2.

3. Ibid at 2-3.

4. Ibid at 5.

5. https://www.end-violence.org/safeonlinecovid

6. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Tipline for online reports or incidents of exploitation. Hyperlink address is: https://report.cybertip.org/

1) What are ways that we can individually and collectively take measures to ensure the safety of children?

A)   Speak with children and adults about the risks of online activity

B)   Set safety/privacy and security measures for any online or social media accounts

C)   Report any material that looks as if it could be exploiting children directly to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's cybertipline at https://report.cybertip.org/

D)   All of the above