

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • January 2024 • Vol. 22 • No. 1

FOCUS: This month's newsletter is the first of two newsletters to focus on the grooming and trafficking of children on social media.

In the years since the beginning of social media, child sexual exploitation has become one of the biggest challenges facing tech companies. The internet has revolutionized the way traffickers groom and recruit potential victims. Every year, more and younger children are given sometimes unmonitored access to devices that connect them to the internet. Children are especially vulnerable to exploitation as their brains prompt them to seek social rewards, including attention and peer approval. Perpetrators who otherwise would not have contact with children can easily and instantaneously connect online with potential victims anywhere in the world.

Recruitment Using Social Media

Traffickers use social media platforms and chat rooms used by children and teens, usually creating fake profiles (catfishing) or pretending to be someone the child knows, to target and groom child victims for sex trafficking.

The process of grooming and recruiting victims online for exploitation involves several stages.

The perpetrators look for children who appear vulnerable by what they post on social media or gaming communities. Research conducted by the United Kingdom's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that children who share feelings of vulnerability on social media are at higher risk of being targeted and groomed by perpetrators online.

The perpetrator initiates contact with the potential victim, usually using a fake identity or profile, and builds a rapport with the child. The perpetrator will create a sense of friendship or love relationship.

Traffickers may promise desirable items such as games, toys, gadgets, or clothing to entice the child and strengthen the bond.

The perpetrators understand the child's vulnerabilities, telling them what they want to hear to gain their trust. Some examples of how a trafficker may respond to a child or teen's vulnerability include:

Victim expresses:

Feeling misunderstood

Feeling of inadequacy with appearance, etc.

Lack of freedom

Trafficker's Response:

I understand you

You are beautiful/I am proud of you

You are mature for your age and can make your own choices

Children will sometimes have two accounts on a social media platform; one they show their parents if their parents check their phones, and one they do not.



Awareness

Once gaining their trust, the predator may request or exchange explicit images or videos with children, often starting with innocent conversations and gradually escalating to more explicit content. Once the predator obtains compromising material, they can use it to manipulate and blackmail the child, sometimes called “sextortion,” into further exploitation or money from the child by threatening to release the images or information. This type of grooming can occur on virtually any online platform, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, Kik, Tinder, and Ask. Fm.

Some traffickers may introduce the child to a group or online community where exploitation is normalized, and other children are already involved. Through manipulation and the desire to fit in, the perpetrator coerces the child into engaging in sexual activities or agreeing to meet offline.

In some cases, traffickers use the grooming tactic of asking children to do “dares” that escalate into sexual activity online. For example, traffickers may begin to dare children to perform sexual behaviors, from removing clothes to increasingly sexual demands to engaging in sexual acts online. This material may then be used to coerce the child to meet the perpetrator in person, threatening to expose the images if they refuse. Once the child and the perpetrator meet in person, they are coerced to engage in commercial sex acts, with the trafficker threatening to expose the images if the child refuses to comply.

Using artificial intelligence, fake images or videos can be created from content posted on social media sites and used to extort victims.

In cases of labor trafficking, the trafficker will post a fake job listing on job boards to attract potential victims. The trafficker will ask the potential victims to post their application online and conduct an interview, often acquiring personal information such as social security numbers, later using them for identity theft. Often, they entice the victim to leave their home country for a job overseas.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Selling Children on Social Media

Traffickers often use covert communication when advertising or selling their victims. This may include coded language, hidden messages, emojis, or encrypted messaging to conceal their activities. Encryption is a technology that protects information by converting it into unreadable code that cannot be deciphered easily by unauthorized people.

These posts carry hidden meanings understood only by those involved in trafficking. Traffickers often post publicly without arousing suspicion while facilitating the selling of children.

Traffickers may also share social media accounts or profiles with others in their trafficking network to sell children.

Traffickers also communicate and are paid covertly when they commit the crime of “virtual child sex trafficking,” which occurs when an offender in the United States sends a digital payment to a trafficker in another country. The trafficker will sexually abuse a child in front of a web camera while the offender in the United States watches a livestream of the abuse.

Traffickers will use live video streaming services and platforms to broadcast sexual abuse or exploitation of child victims in real-time. These streams are available to viewers who pay for access or belong to a closed group or forum via social media with the traffickers. Within these closed spaces online, traffickers can also share information about potential victims, exchange contact details, negotiate deals, and watch online child sexual abuse at a distance. Child sexual abuse, depicting the rape of infants and toddlers, bondage, humiliation through sexual assault, including self-mutilation, youth-on youth abuse, and child-on-child abuse, as well as bestiality, are not uncommon.

Finally, online child sex offenders are increasingly moving to the Dark Web. The Dark Web is a series of anonymous networks that prevent the use of traditional means to detect, investigate, and

Younger and younger children are being targeted “on an industrial scale” by internet groomers. In 2021, there was a three-fold increase in imagery showing 7–10 year olds targeted and groomed by internet predators.

(https://enough.org/stats_exploitation)

prosecute online child sexual exploitation offenses. The sites often expand rapidly. One site obtained 200,000 new members within its first four weeks of operation. Some sites require users to pay a fee to gain access, generally using cryptocurrency payments, commercializing the abuse suffered by victims whose images are trafficked. Others require new or prospective members to provide newly produced Child Sexual Abuse Material, pushing offenders further into their abuse of children. Though these sites sit within the Dark Web, they are readily accessible to anyone.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Children's Brains and Social Media

Children are especially vulnerable to grooming by traffickers online. Children's brains undergo a fundamental shift starting around ten years old, which compels them to seek social rewards, especially attention and peer approval. Receptors for the "happy hormones" oxytocin and dopamine multiply in a part of the preteen brain, which makes them extra sensitive to attention and admiration from others. A dopamine and oxytocin rush occurs whenever the child experiences a "social reward" such as attention or a "like" from a friend. Therefore, classmates, friends, or people they have never met can deliver or withhold rewards in the form of "likes," views, and follows. The public nature of the internet also plays a role in the experience of "social reward."

This makes any child posting online vulnerable to bullying, exploitation, grooming, and trafficking.

Social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat have been increasingly linked to mental health problems, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and body image concerns.

Adults may also experience this sense of reward when on social media. Still, they usually have a sense of selfhood that relies less on feedback from others, and they can usually better regulate their emotional responses.

Traffickers will create accounts impersonating their victims and often spread lies or rumors about them on social media, referred to as "outing." Traffickers will also use social media to stalk victims, even when they can escape the life. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Signs of Human Trafficking in Youth

Trafficking can be hard to recognize, especially for the people being groomed or trafficked. You can help keep children and teens safe by paying attention to changes in their behavior, such as:

- Avoiding you, friends, and family and having new friends they met online or older friends
- Frequent tardiness or absence from school or work- some children and teens are victimized after school or when they should be in school
- Sleeping often when they're home and staying out late or all weekend—many child victims of sex trafficking still live at home
- Loss of interest in things they once enjoyed
- Having or bragging about money, expensive items, or traveling with no reasonable explanation
- Starting to use drugs or alcohol
- Frequent injuries with no reasonable explanation
- Having secret online accounts- Children sometimes have two accounts on a social media platform. One, they show their parents if they check their phones; one, they do not.

These may be signs of human trafficking or peer bullying, or they could struggle with mental health and difficulties at home or school. This list is not inclusive.

Advocacy

Social Media Safety for Kids

Survive and Thrive Advocacy Center recommends that the most effective way to keep your kids safe online is to become more involved with the youth's online world. Warn them that someone might pretend to be a friend and be a trafficker, how traffickers target their victims, and red flags to watch out for.

Encourage them to speak with you if they feel uncomfortable or unsure about an online interaction or if anyone asks them for personal information.

Educate them on the dangers of "oversharing" online. Remind them that social media is not a personal photo album, and that people online are not always who they say they are.

Warn the child to refrain from posting information such as their full name, date of birth, contact number, or address.

Also, warn the child never to post pictures they would not want the world to see and never share the places or times of where you will be going nor add friends they do not know. Using Artificial Intelligence, traffickers can post fake images or videos from content posted on the child's social media sites.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

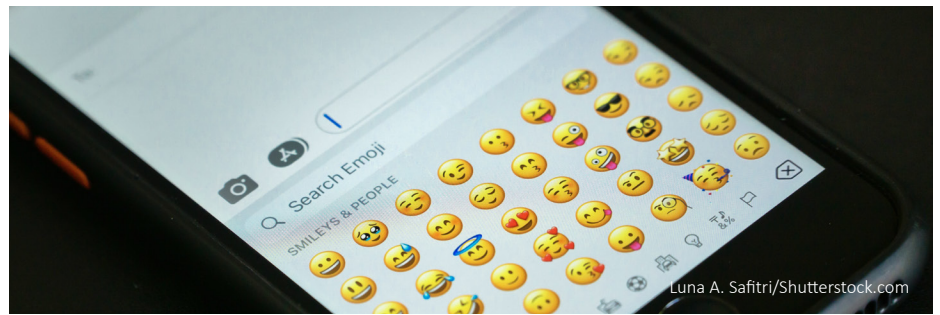


The Hidden Language

Children and teens use emojis as complete sentences; many have meanings unknown to many adults. The website Gabb recommends always considering the context when viewing an emoji.

Does a victory sign mean a team won a soccer game, or is it intended to be a vagina? A bowl of noodles could be a request for a naked photo, and broccoli sometimes means marijuana. Emojis of food, expressions, and parts of the body form the foundation of explicit and drug-related language.

Recognizing emojis' possible meanings is necessary to help keep children away from potential perpetrators. Please click [here](#) to access an Emoji meaning chart.



Recommendations for Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms often have policies and mechanisms in place to combat trafficking activities, which include collaborating with law enforcement to identify and apprehend offenders involved in the sex trafficking of children.

All social media platforms use algorithms, which are designed to determine the type of content that users see on their feeds or timelines. The algorithms collect data about users' behaviors, actions, and preferences based on the accounts they follow, the content they engage with, their search history, and demographic details, and these can be used to detect human trafficking and sex trafficking of children while ensuring the right to privacy.

Social media platforms can also develop proactive detection algorithms. These algorithms can analyze content and user behavior to identify patterns suggestive of child sexual exploitation.

Additionally, platforms should establish easily accessible reporting mechanisms that enable users to report content or activities that are suspected of child trafficking or exploitation. Moreover, anonymous reporting options encourage users to report suspicious activities without reluctance or fear.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Livestreaming Child Sexual Exploitation (LCSE)

Livestreaming on social media has become extremely popular among children and adolescents. Livestreaming allows a user to produce real-time video broadcasted over an online social media platform, whether viewed publicly or by a restricted audience. Live.me and Omegle are among the most popular platforms for livestreaming, along with livestreaming capabilities on mainstream platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, and Twitch. Most platforms have a chat feature where users can interact with viewers of their content.

Livestreaming child sexual exploitation (LCSE) occurs when a perpetrator coerces a child victim to engage in sexually explicit conduct in real-time to one or more viewers.

There are generally three types of LCSE: child “self-generated,” offender-streaming, and virtual child sex trafficking. Child “self-generated” exploitation occurs when the trafficker coerces a child to engage in sexually explicit conduct on a live stream, usually from the child’s bedroom or a bathroom.

Offender-streaming exploitation occurs when a perpetrator, usually a family member or friend, sexually abuses a child in person while livestreaming the abuse to viewers. The viewers typically do not know each other, and they often participate in the activity by requesting that specific sex acts be committed.

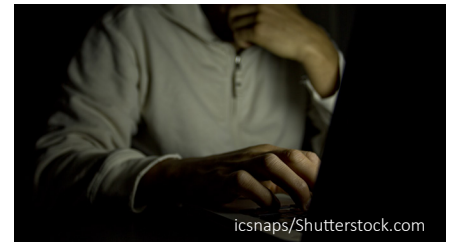
Finally, virtual child sex trafficking is when offenders pay to watch while another offender sexually abuses a child in person or offenders pay a victim directly to create “self-generated” Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Because of the interactive nature of live-streaming platforms, offenders can request specific sexual abuse acts for an additional cost. Payment is usually made digitally. This offense often involves offenders in the United States and facilitators and children in foreign countries. Children may be transported from rural areas of that foreign country to urban settings to fulfill the demand.

The trauma caused by LCSE and other forms of online child exploitation is compounded by the victim’s knowledge that documentation of their abuse will live on the internet in perpetuity. Victims of online child sexual abuse must receive robust, ongoing victim services to aid in their healing.

[IJM Summary Report Online Sexual Exploitation of Children](#)

Over the past three months, law enforcement was not able to investigate nearly 100,000 IP addresses that are known to be downloading and sharing CSAM due to limited resources.

*Senate Judiciary Hearing,
Feb. 14, 2023*



*CD9 – Code 9: Parents in Room
KPC – Keeping Parents Clueless*

Parents can go to several websites to decipher what their teen is saying on their cell phone text messages or social media sites. Please click [here](#) to access Text Lingo: Secret Language of Teens for an up to date list of their coded language.



Advocacy

Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is a criminal offense. Image-based sexual abuse includes the creation, theft, extortion, threatened or actual distribution, or any use of sexualized or sexually explicit materials without the consent of the person depicted.

Sexting is the sharing and receiving of sexually explicit messages and nude or partially nude images via cell phone, which an estimated 40 percent of teens engage in. Sexts may be sent as regular text messages through apps like Snapchat and WhatsApp or online games. Sexting, when involving minors, is legally classified as child sexual abuse, which is a serious federal crime in the United States. It is illegal to produce, possess, or distribute any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor.

Teens may “sext” for a variety of reasons, and some may feel pressured into sexting by online or offline boyfriends or girlfriends who may threaten to break up with them if they don’t send a picture. They often rationalize that sending photos to one person won’t hurt.

Unfortunately, many teens discover that someone they sent a sext to has forwarded that image to others without their knowledge. The consequences can be academically, socially, and emotionally devastating. Sexting usually violates school policy. The image may be seen by college admissions personnel or by potential employers. In some cases, the teen is charged for sending nude photos.

Image-based sexual abuse, sometimes referred to as ‘revenge porn,’ may be shared on specialized ‘revenge porn’ websites, on social media, via email, text, or messaging services, or shared with specific individuals, such as the victim’s family, classmates, or employers. The images may also be shared offline. Sharing pictures or videos that have been photoshopped or otherwise altered in any way may also be considered image-based sexual abuse.

Consent is required at two stages: when the image or video is taken and again when it is shared with any third party. In the case of sexting, the person freely shares the pictures of themselves but is usually unaware that the images have then been shared or may not give consent to the photos being shared. Even in cases of self-generated explicit materials, it is never the victim’s fault when their trust is broken and they are abused.

In some cases, the first level of consent is missing. For instance, the victim may have been unaware the image was taken, coerced into sharing the image, or the perpetrator may have stolen or hacked the image.

At times, the images are used to blackmail those depicted or to coerce them to send more sexually explicit photos. The perpetrator may threaten to harm your friends or relatives by using the images or other information they have obtained from you unless you comply with their demands. This is referred to as sextortion. Globally, sextortion has become a serious threat to young people. Adolescents are more susceptible to sextortion because of their developmental stage. They take more risks, struggle to control their impulses and desires, and are more easily swayed by peer pressure.

Child sextortion is becoming increasingly common—as far back as 2016, the U.S. Justice Department identified it as “the most important and fastest-growing cyberthreat to children.” According to Enough is Enough, ninety percent of sextortion victims are teenage boys. Please click [here](#) to view their webinar on *Sex Trafficking in the United States: What every parent needs to know*. Boys are significantly less likely to tell their parents they are victims of sextortion than girls. Moreover, LGBTQ+ teens are more than twice as likely to be victims of sextortion as their heterosexual and gender-conforming peers.

Moreover, a “fake hacker” may claim that they have hacked into your child’s device and found inappropriate sexual images. They will demand money or more images.

Other forms of image-based sexual abuse may include the non-consensual use of a person’s images for the creation of photoshopped/artificial pornography or sexualized materials intended to portray a person, referred to as “cheap fake” or “deepfake” pornography. Also, IBSA includes the non-consensual recording of images or videos, including so-called “down blousing,” “upskirting,” or secret recordings in places such as restrooms and dressing rooms.

No one is free from the threat of IBSA.

Solutions must include stronger legislation, avenues for victims to sue in civil litigation, online platform responsibility to remove non-consensual explicit imagery swiftly, and survivor-centered removal forms. The laws regarding image-based sexual abuse vary from country to country.

For more information, please click [here](#).



How can YOU impact policy change?

The National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) publishes a “Dirty Dozen List” each year, a campaign exposing twelve mainstream entities that enable and even promote and profit from sexual abuse and exploitation.

In 2023, all twelve were tech platforms involved in some way in facilitating the sexual exploitation of children and adults. NCOSE offers numerous opportunities for action anyone can take to advocate for and impact policy change with these platforms.

In past years, this campaign has yielded major victories at Google, Netflix, TikTok, Verizon, and many more.

Please find a brief description below of social media platforms and action alerts to which you can respond.

- Please click [here](#) to express concern with the rampant number of adults grooming minors for sexual abuse online and Discord’s lack of robust safety features that allow such abuse to not only happen regularly but actively thrive in Discord’s environment.
- Please click [here](#) to insist Instagram prioritizes child safety!
- Please click [here](#) to tell Reddit to delete all images of sexual violence from its platform.
- With Apple’s nearly limitless resources, there can be no excuse for the deception of consumers and caregivers on such a massive scale: age ratings and descriptions mislead parents about the content, risks, and dangers to children on available apps. Please click [here](#) to urge Apple to fix its app age ratings.
- Tell Snapchat to step up child safety measure by clicking [here](#).

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Bark scans your child’s text messages, 30+ social media apps, web browsers, emails, and other online activity, keeping you informed, and your child protected. Bark can also help you manage screen times, block websites and apps with inappropriate content, and track location.

Danger Warning! Social Media and Sex Trafficking Recruitment

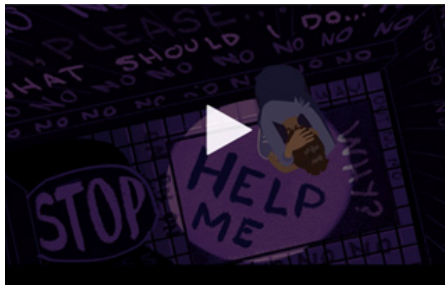
Social media is increasingly being exploited to contact, recruit, and sell children and youth for sex. Some traffickers use online ads to target victims, or they will send friend/follow requests to young people in their region, proceed to strike up a conversation and develop online friendships. These conversations may start friendly and innocent, but then the traffickers will begin to use manipulation to charm their potential victims. The online friendship quickly evolves into a romantic relationship, and this is where the sextortion techniques are used to lure their victims into human trafficking.

Please click [here](#) to view this webinar sponsored by Survive and Thrive in affiliation with Big Bend Coalition Against Human Trafficking and the International Rescue Committee.

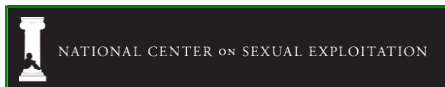
With the fall 2023 iOS update, Apple added a feature to automatically blur images and videos containing nudity for children 12 and under in iMessage, FaceTime, AirDrop, and Photos Picker. This tool is also available for teens and adults as an opt-in feature. Previously, this blurring feature had to be turned on by parents, was unavailable to anyone over 13, only detected still images, and only worked in iMessage.



Action



Please click [here](#) to view a short video by the Blue Campaign of “Mia” meeting her trafficker over social media and being groomed.



Please click [here](#) to view video resources by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation on the impact of social media on child abuse, pornography, sexual violence and human trafficking.



When the Surgeon General issued an advisory on smoking in 1964, it became a priority to regulate Big Tobacco companies for the sake of public health. Now, we’re facing a new crisis: social media’s impact on the mental health and safety of kids. It must now be a priority to regulate Big Tech to protect our children’s mental and emotional health - even their very lives. Please click [here](#) to view this 30 second PSA.

Sign the Petition to Show You Support John Doe

When John Doe was 13 years old, he was exploited by sex traffickers into creating sexually explicit images, which were later posted on Twitter. Twitter refused to remove or block the content depicting the sexual exploitation of John Doe, who was clearly and demonstratively a minor and continued to profit from its distribution knowingly.

It is on behalf of John Doe and countless other survivors like him that the National Center on Sexual Exploitation Law Center, along with The Haba Law Firm and The Matiasic Law Firm, has brought a lawsuit against Twitter.

Please click [here](#) to sign the petition in support of John Doe and all children exploited online.

Steps to Protect Children

Survive and Thrive recommends the following measures to help protect your children. Check the kids’ devices frequently and thoroughly, including activity, messages, and contacts. Set appropriate parental control, such as age restrictions for downloading apps and time restrictions. At times, the child may have two separate accounts on a social media site. Be sure to check for the second site.

Educate yourself on how cybercrimes occur against children for sexual purposes. Once the online methods and tactics traffickers use are known, it is easier to detect signs of online exploitation.

Most importantly, maintain a trustful relationship with your children. While safety features are helpful, you should rely more on your relationship with them than filters and other safeguards. Also, a child’s safety is more important than their privacy. This is not a trust issue; it is a desire to love and protect your child.



24-Hour Call Center:

To report information about a missing or exploited child call our 24-Hour Call Center:

1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

Report child sexual exploitation online at [CyberTipline.org](https://www.cyberTipline.org).



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