

# The Nefarious Reality of Online Exploitation

A GUIDE TO ONLINE GROOMING, SEXTORTION, AND CYBERBULLYING.

## IN THIS GUIDE, YOU WILL:

- ✓ Learn the calculated and intentional manipulation of predators.
- ✓ Understand the grooming practices used on vulnerable kids.
- ✓ Learn practical tips for protecting kids online.



## A NOTE TO PARENTS

Everyone wants to protect children and teens from harm, both online and in the real world. Whether you're a parent, guardian, caregiver, or anyone responsible for a child's well-being, this guide was created with you in mind. It will equip you with tangible information to help you set the stage for preventing harm before it ever happens.



## ONLINE GROOMING - HOW PERPETRATORS TARGET KIDS

Online grooming is a calculated and intentional form of manipulation in which predators use digital platforms to form relationships with children, exploit emotional or social vulnerabilities, and gradually prepare them for sexual abuse or potential involvement in sex trafficking.

This danger affects nearly every young person with internet access, making it a widespread and urgent global concern. In 2024, the U.S. Department of State confirmed that traffickers routinely rely on online spaces to locate, engage, and groom children for exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

The data underscores a troubling pattern: predators deliberately target children across social media platforms, gaming communities, and private messaging apps such as spaces where young people interact freely and often without supervision.

### From Online Interaction to Real-World Exploitation

One of the most alarming aspects of online grooming is how rapidly digital contact can turn into real-world harm. Groomers work methodically to distance children from trusted adults by promoting secrecy and discouraging open communication. They may suggest that parents “wouldn’t understand” the relationship or use intimidation to prevent the child from disclosing conversations taking place on apps or online platforms.

Sexual content is typically introduced slowly. Predators test boundaries, gradually shifting conversations toward explicit topics and normalizing inappropriate behavior to reduce resistance. Over time, this desensitization makes exploitation easier to achieve.

Once a predator gains access to explicit images or sensitive personal information, control is often maintained through sextortion. Children who may have initially shared content willingly can become trapped as predators threaten to distribute images to family members, friends, or peers unless the child continues to comply with escalating sexual demands.

Recognizing grooming patterns is essential for prevention. Online predators follow predictable steps, beginning with harmless-seeming contact and progressing through calculated stages of trust-building, manipulation, and coercion that ultimately lead to sexual exploitation. Awareness of these behaviors equips parents, caregivers, and trusted adults to identify warning signs early and intervene before further harm occurs.

Predators exploit the features of social platforms. They use easy messaging, anonymity, and a broad reach to find, contact, and manipulate vulnerable people, especially teens and children.

### SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Surveys show **1 in 5** children received unwanted sexual solicitations online, and up to **44%** have been asked for inappropriate images.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, reports to U.S. hotlines — such as online enticement — jumped from about **292,000** to more than **518,000** in a year, reflecting increased exploitation attempts.<sup>3</sup>

Gender disparities are notable: girls are disproportionately targeted, comprising a large majority of known grooming victims where gender is reported.<sup>4</sup>

Predators are strategic and persistent. They may spend months building trust before exploiting, and they leverage features like private messaging, disappearing photos, and group chats to evade detection.<sup>5</sup>

## HOW PREDATORS START CONTACT

Online predators do not choose their victims at random. Research shows clear patterns in how groomers identify and target specific children online. Adolescents between the ages of **13** and **17**, LGBTQ+ youth, and children with physical or mental disabilities are disproportionately targeted, as predators deliberately exploit vulnerability, isolation, and unmet emotional needs to facilitate abuse.

**60% of online predators use social media platforms to groom minors.**

THORN

Children facing family disruption, social exclusion, or academic difficulties are especially at risk and vulnerable to grooming by predators. Predators often step into these gaps

by providing attention, affirmation, and a sense of belonging, gradually building trust before introducing sexual conversations or requesting personal and sensitive information.



## STAGES OF CONTACT WITH VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS

### Stage 1

Most online sexual exploitation begins with contact through social media or messaging (with predators posing as teens or peers). About **82%** of child sex crimes have an online social media contact origin.<sup>6</sup> Predators typically begin by identifying children who appear especially vulnerable, often targeting those who show signs of isolation, family conflict, or low self-confidence and self-esteem.

### Stage 2

Predators frequently use fake profiles, often pretending to be someone the victim can relate to, to reduce suspicion and build trust.<sup>7</sup> Predators will then make contact on digital platforms where young people are most active, including social media apps such as *TikTok*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, *Discord*, *WhatsApp*, as well as online gaming spaces and private messaging services. In these environments, individuals seeking to exploit children can steer conversations into dangerous grooming interactions extremely quickly—sometimes within seconds of the first message, and often escalating to high-risk exchanges in less than an hour.<sup>8</sup>

### Stage 3

After establishing contact, groomers focus on creating trust and emotional dependence. They position themselves as supportive, relatable friends who understand the child's feelings and interests. Studies indicate that one in three young people view online friends as some of their closest relationships, which increases the risk of manipulation when adults deliberately abuse that trust through calculated and sexually motivated communication.<sup>9</sup>

## SEXTORTION: THREATS, BLACKMAIL, AND ESCALATION

**Sextortion** is a tactic where someone obtains sexual content (or claims to have it) and threatens exposure unless the victim complies with money, more sexual images, or other demands. Cybercriminals are tricking minors into sending sexually explicit photos and videos, and then blackmailing them for payment.

### Key Trends & Harms

Research reports that about **21%** of teens experienced sexual extortion in 2024.<sup>10</sup> Sextortion often involves financial threats where perpetrators demand payment via gift cards, payment apps, or cryptocurrency.<sup>11</sup>

### A disturbing consequence: Victims can feel trapped with no way out.

This abuse can lead to feelings of shame, isolation, and, in tragic cases, some U.S. teens targeted by sextortion scams are driven to harm themselves or have died by suicide<sup>12</sup> and

**81%** of sextortion threats happen exclusively online.<sup>13</sup>

“Social media platforms, gaming sites, and messaging apps have become the primary spaces where perpetrators find, target, and/or threaten young people.”<sup>14</sup>

Up to **1 in 5** teens report experiencing sextortion.<sup>15</sup> National reporting shows an increase in sextortion complaints, with thousands of incidents each year.<sup>16</sup>

### According to Thorn, the demands made by perpetrators also vary:

- **39%** demanded more sexual images
- **31%** demanded in-person meetings
- **25%** made relationship demands (like staying in a relationship)
- **22%** demanded money

**1 in 7** young people who experienced sextortion as a minor said they harmed themselves in response to the abuse. THORN

*Perpetrators frequently use threats to share images with family members, friends, or peers whose judgment holds significant emotional weight for the victim who is being sextorted. By leveraging fear and shame in this highly personal way, sextortion becomes a powerful tool of control, isolating young people and trapping them in ongoing cycles of abuse.*

## HOW SEXTORTION UNFOLDS

**Step 1** - An initial social media contact (often a flirtatious or “supportive” message).

**Step 2** - A request for sexually suggestive photos or videos.

**Step 3** - Threats to expose the content to peers, family, or on public platforms unless demands are met.

### WHY SEXTORTION ESCALATES

Perpetrators rely on shame and fear by using sextortion. Their psychological manipulation of victims and the speed and anonymity offered by digital technology contribute to rapid escalation. Perpetrators exploit feelings of fear, shame, and isolation, giving victims little time to seek help. Many victims hide the fact that they were approached at all. Studies suggest that only a minority of teens (20%) report these interactions to parents.<sup>17</sup>

## CYBERBULLYING: HARASSMENT, PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT, AND OVERLAP WITH EXPLOITATION

**Cyberbullying**, the repeated harassment, threats, or humiliation online, is widespread and harmful. Cyberbullying makes up a large share of youth online complaints; in some reporting periods it accounted for more than **17%** of all helpline contacts.<sup>18</sup> Multiple surveys suggest nearly **1 in 5** children encounter cyberbullying, and about **30%** of youth.<sup>19</sup>

### Psychological & Social Effects

Cyberbullying is linked to:

- anxiety and depression,
- reduced self-esteem,
- social withdrawal,
- increased suicide risk.

These effects are magnified when bullying overlaps with coercion or exploitation. For example, a cyberbullying case can escalate into sextortion or harassment tied to intimate content.<sup>20</sup> Anonymity and the ability to create multiple “throwaway” accounts make it easier for bullies and predators to avoid accountability and continue targeting victims.<sup>21</sup>

### Grooming: Recognizing Progressive Manipulation

**Grooming** is a gradual process where an offender establishes emotional rapport with a minor to gain trust and exploit them. Predators provide excessive compliments and emotional support to build trust, encourage secrecy “Don’t tell anyone else,” isolates the child from parents and other support systems, and asking for images “just between us.”<sup>21</sup>

Predators often start with casual conversation, then escalate to personal questions, and eventually push for intimate interactions or exploitative content. This process may unfold over weeks or months, making it harder to detect until exploitation has taken hold.

Once trust is established, predators may pivot to sextortion, attempt in-person contact, involve victims in broader networks, or push images into exploitative circles. This crossover shows why grooming and online exploitation are not isolated problems but part of a broader continuum of abuse.

### Practical Tips for Parents & Caregivers: Protecting Kids Online

To help youth navigate social media safely, parents can take actions that combine education, supervision, and open communication. The goal isn’t surveillance alone but empowerment, open communication, and trust.

Teen girls favor TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, while boys prefer Twitch, Reddit, and YouTube, making these platforms prime hunting grounds for the estimated **500,000-750,000** predators who are online daily.<sup>22</sup>

According to OurRescue, “High-risk messaging apps, including *Discord, Signal, Google Hangouts, GroupMe, WhatsApp, Kik, Viber, and WeChat*, provide encrypted communication which makes monitoring difficult, while



some dating apps like *Tinder*, *Bumble*, *Yubo*, *Kasual*, *Grindr*, and *Hinge* expose teens to adult predators.

Perhaps most concerning are secret vault apps that disguise themselves as innocent tools, such as *Calculator*, *Keepsafe Vault*, and *Private Photo Vault*, allowing children to hide inappropriate content and communications from their parents. All platforms pose a level of risk to minors.<sup>23</sup>

### Start Honest, Ongoing Conversations

Being able to identify the warning signs that a child may be involved in online grooming or sexual exploitation is essential for preventing harm. Shifts in digital behavior, increased secrecy with devices, and hesitation or refusal to talk about online relationships can all be indicators of a potentially dangerous situation. Regularly ask about who kids are chatting with and how they feel about their online interactions. Normalize discussions about risks like sextortion, inappropriate requests, and manipulation.<sup>24</sup>

### Set Clear Digital Safety Rules

Agree on appropriate online behavior, what apps are permitted, and who can be contacted. Create a “family media/tech plan” that includes screen times, off-limits topics, and privacy expectations. (See our resources area to download a family tech contract)

### Use Privacy & Safety Settings

Turn on private accounts, disable location sharing, block unknown users, and adjust

contact permissions. Consider parental controls or monitoring tools, but pair them with open dialogue to build trust.

Monitor mental wellness. Be aware of dramatic shifts in mood, sleep, or self-esteem as they can be related to online victimization.<sup>25</sup>

Stay informed about platform safety features. Many social apps provide reporting, blocking, and safety centers. Use them and review settings together.

### Know the Friend List and Watch for Red Flags

Be alert for secretive behavior about a particular online friend, sudden withdrawal from family, devices always in hand with screens facing down, and unexplained purchases or transfers. Ensure children aren't communicating with strangers or suspicious accounts.

### TECHNOLOGY PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE

According to Thorn, “Technology plays a central role in virtually all sextortion cases, with **94%** of threats made through digital platforms. However, how technology is used varies:

**In financial sextortion**, perpetrators often target victims they don't know personally, using social media or gaming platforms to make initial contact before quickly moving to demands for money.

**In relationship-based sextortion**, existing offline relationships leverage popular apps and text messaging services to stay connected even when they aren't together. In sextortion, that access creates opportunity for threats and intimidation.”<sup>26</sup>



**Education and open communication creates a safer future.**

## **AWARENESS + ACTION = PROTECTION**

Understanding the mechanics of online exploitation—from grooming to sextortion to cyberbullying—helps parents and caregivers spot warning signs early and intervene effectively.

The threat is real and statistically significant, but with education, thoughtful supervision, staying informed, having open communication with kids, setting digital boundaries, and monitoring activity, risks can be substantially reduced.

Feelings of shame and embarrassment often stop victims from seeking help. Many worry they will be judged, blamed, or punished for having shared images, and this stigma is something abusers deliberately exploit to keep control.

Fear also plays a powerful and decisive role. Victims may stay silent because they believe speaking up could cause the perpetrator to follow through on threats or escalate the harm.

Additionally, many young people are unaware of support options

or reporting resources, leaving them feeling isolated and unsure of where to turn. Others hesitate to come forward out of concern that parents or caregivers might respond by taking away devices or restricting access to online platforms, further limiting their sense of connection and autonomy.

Online exploitation is a real and evolving threat, and social media, while offering connection, also opens doors for grooming, sextortion, cyberbullying, and trafficking-related behaviors.

**At Hope Inspire Love, we advocate for a family-focused approach to online safety that emphasizes both strong device protections and open, ongoing communication.** Keeping devices updated, using parental control tools, and staying aware of online activity can greatly lower the risk of exploitation. When these practices are paired with guidance on managing a child's digital footprint, families can build a strong line of defense against online predators who target children.



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