

The Truth About SEXTORTION

The **crime of sextortion** occurs when someone uses the threat of sharing sexual images or videos to control, manipulate, or exploit another person. Sextortion is a type of image-based sexual abuse and exploitation. Although people of any age can be affected, children and teens are especially at risk.



Understanding Sextortion

At its core, sextortion is a form of blackmail. An offender threatens to release private, sensitive, or sexual images—or even fabricate images using deepfake technology or AI—unless the victim complies with demands. These demands often involve sending additional sexual content, providing money, or performing sexual acts.



Sextortion commonly begins on social media platforms or dating apps such as Snapchat, TikTok, or Tinder. After intimate images or photos are shared, an offender threatens to make those images public and expose the child or teen unless payment or other demands are met.

Who Is Targeted and How

Targets: While anyone can be victimized, there has been a sharp rise in cases involving teenage boys ages 14–17.¹

Tactics: Offenders frequently use fake profiles (catfishing) to build trust. They may start

conversations on social media, gaming platforms, or messaging apps and then move victims to private or encrypted platforms.

Types of Sextortion

Financial: Demands for money, cryptocurrency, or gift cards.

Sexual: Requests for more explicit photos or videos.

Warning Signs

Rapid emotional or romantic escalation, pressure to send explicit content, fake or sparse profiles, and unusual communication behavior.

Steps to Take If You Are a Victim

Do not comply: Paying money or sending additional images rarely stops the threats.

Cut off contact: Block the offender immediately.

Preserve evidence: Screenshot messages, usernames, and profiles before blocking.

Report the crime: Contact local law enforcement or the FBI.

Use support tools: Minors can use the “Take It Down” tool to help remove images at takeitdown.ncmec.org

Sextortion can cause serious emotional harm, including fear, shame, and anxiety, which may negatively affect school performance and overall well-being.² At Hope Inspire Love, we emphasize education and awareness to help children and teens stay safe online.

Additional Red Flags

- The person claims their camera doesn’t work, but asks to see yours.
- They contact you immediately and push for images or video calls.
- They use threats or fear to demand money.



- Their profile has very few photos or followers.
- Many of the offenders' photos are sexualized in nature or risqué.
- Messages contain frequent spelling or grammar errors.
- The account appears newly created.

44% of victims said their images were captured or saved without their permission. An additional **13% reported being threatened** with artificial intelligence-generated deepfake images created to resemble them.³ According to NCMEC's CyberTipline, an average of **100 sextortion reports** were made per day in 2024.⁴

Guidance for Dealing With Sextortion

- **End communication immediately.** Cease contact and do not respond to any messages.
- **Block the offender** on all platforms used.
- **Refuse to pay**, as this usually increases extortion attempts. In most cases, a sextortionist will continue to threaten, but if you cease communication, they will move on.
- **Report the incident** to police, the FBI, or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children if the victim is a minor.
- **Document everything** to support an investigation. Collect evidence to help file a police report.
- **Avoid "cyber-recovery" services** that promise to erase images for a fee; these are often scams.
- **Consider temporarily deactivating social media accounts** if harassment continues across platforms.

How Online Predators and Scammers Target Victims

Despite parental warnings about online safety, many children and teens are still vulnerable. Concerns have grown following the exposure of a violent online network known as "764," which targeted young users through fake identities on social media, gaming platforms, and apps. Predators also resided in Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, India, and the United States.⁵

Predators, using fake identities and accounts, manipulated thousands of children and teens into performing sexual or violent acts on camera, then shared the content within their networks to maintain control. Although the FBI has arrested some leaders, these and other types of networks continue to operate.

Common Sextortion Schemes and Traps

Offenders often pretend to be peers and build emotional connections by reaching out with false promises of friendship or romance, pretending to be the victim's age, and building trust. They may send an explicit image first, then request one in return. Once



a victim complies, the offender escalates demands for more images or money, threatening to expose the content to friends, family, or the public. These threats can terrify victims into silence and cooperation.

Some schemes become extremely dangerous, involving coercion into self-harm, animal abuse, or carving symbols into the skin (fansigning). In severe cases, predators bully and threaten to expose victims' real identities (doxxing), send police to their homes (swatting), or encourage suicide.⁶

Tragic Consequences of Sextortion

Several teens have died by suicide after being sextorted, including Ryan Stewart. Ryan, a high-school senior, fell prey to an online scam-

16% of victims never told anyone about their experience. This silence prevents them from getting the help they need and can allow the abuse to continue. Sextortion is extremely traumatic and isolating. Despite the severity of sextortion, many young victims suffer in silence.⁷

90% of victims detected were teenage males, aged 14 to 17. This new surge of cases has skyrocketed in recent years, leading to significant financial losses and tragic suicides.⁸



mer pretending to be a young girl interested in him. The scammer sent an explicit photo and asked Ryan to share one. When he did, the scammer threatened to post the photo on social media if Ryan didn't send money.⁹

Fearing for his reputation, Ryan followed through and sent money. Then, when the scammer demanded more money than Ryan could get, they urged him to end his life, which he did. In a note Ryan left behind, he shared his anguish and embarrassment about what had happened.

How Parents Can Protect Their Children

Recognize vulnerability: On average, most victims are ages 13–17, though cases have involved children as young as 9.¹⁰

Use digital safeguards: Create a family media plan (download our Family Tech Plan in the resources area of our website), enable parental controls, and adjust privacy settings on their apps or social media accounts. Controlling your child or teen's online access and behavior might be a knee-jerk reaction to protecting their safety, but it is recommended that open communication and honest dialogue about internet dangers provide a better platform for educating them.

Maintain open communication: Teach children how to recognize predators and reassure them that they can talk openly without fear or blame.

Teaching Online Safety

Explain risks in age-appropriate terms and emphasize that unsafe requests should be reported immediately. Encourage ongoing conversations



rather than one-time warnings. It is imperative that parents teach their children and teens to know and understand how to spot predators and to say “no” to their demands. Secondly, ensuring they feel 100% safe discussing what happened with you and that they understand there is no shame and no blame. You’ll be there for them, no matter what happens.

Practical Safety Tips for Children and Teens

Explain online risks in age-appropriate ways. For example, you might tell an older elementary-school child, “The internet is helpful for homework and talking with friends, but bad things can happen there, too. People have asked kids to post pictures without any clothes on, or to do harmful things to themselves or even their pets. This is so dangerous that I want you to come to me immediately if you ever see anything like it online.”

Share specific online safety tips. The goal is for your child or teen to understand the risks so they can make safe choices. The points below give you somewhere to start, but keep an eye on your child's reaction. They might feel so upset that they need a break (and a big, reassuring hug) after a few minutes. Be sure to restart the conversation later, and keep the door open for their questions and concerns.

Think carefully before sharing any private images or videos. Scammers can also pose as your friends or someone you know, so pause before sending anything private or intimate to anyone.

Remember that livestreams can be recorded. Perpetrators will do anything to capture your photos or videos to misuse them.

Cover webcams when not in use. Hackers can remotely activate webcams, so cover them with a piece of tape or a sticky when you are online.

Only connect with people you know in real life.

Protect passwords and personal information and use strong, hard-to-guess passwords. Do not use dates, birthdays, pets' names, or other easy-to-find words that a scammer can figure out.

Be cautious with links from unknown senders.

Trust your instincts. If something feels wrong, weird, or makes you uncomfortable, leave and get adult help.

How to Know if You're Being Sextorted

According to Thorn, to help your child or teen understand and figure out if what they are experiencing is sextortion, they will need to try to use an "if, then" statement.¹¹ So, if you don't do something, then there's a consequence. For example:

"If I don't give them more nude images or meet them for sex, then they'll post online all the private pictures I already gave them for my family/friends to see."

"If I don't give them a nude picture or have sex with them, then they said they'll hurt themselves or break up with me because I must not care about them anyway."

"If I don't give them money, then they'll share a private video of me that they recorded while I thought we were just livestreaming."

"If I don't stay in a relationship with them, then they'll post the images I shared with them while we were together."

"If I give them just one more image, then they'll stop threatening me and leave me alone."

THORN

If Your Child or Teen Has Already Been Targeted

Children and teens often do not report that they have been victims of sextortion due to intense feelings of shame, fear of consequences, and the manipulative tactics used by perpetrators. Roughly **85% of young victims** surveyed cite embarrassment and hopelessness as a primary reason for not seeking help.¹²

- Watch for emotional or mental health struggles such as anxiety, depression, or PTSD.
- Reassure your child that they are not at fault and that they have done nothing wrong.
- Help them report the incident through one of resources below:

CYBERTIPLINE: report.cybertip.org

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY:

dhs.gov/see-something-say-something

NCMEC: takeitdown.ncmec.org

SOURCES:

1,3 - <https://www.thorn.org/blog/the-growing-threat-of-sex-tortion>
6,7,8,11, 12, 13,14, 15, 16 - <https://www.thorn.org/research/library/financial-sex-tortion>
2,4,5,10 - <https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2024/ncmec-releases-new-sex-tortion-data>
9 - <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2022/05/20/sex-tortion-teen-suicide-campbell-dnt-the-lead-vpx.cnn>



Let your child know that seeking help and practicing self-care are powerful steps toward healing and recovery.

Online interaction plays a major role in how children and teens socialize today. Many regularly communicate with people they know only through the internet, often connected by shared friends, hobbies, or gaming communities.

Because of these connections, young people may not view online contacts as strangers—even when the person is an adult.

Notably, **1 out of every 3 sextortion victims** personally knew the person exploiting them.¹³ In many cases, the offender was a romantic partner, a classmate, or someone familiar to the family.¹⁴

When sextortion involves someone the victim knows, the emotional harm can be more severe, as it involves a breach of trust and more believable threats to share images with shared social circles.¹⁵

Age also plays a significant role in risk. Research shows that **1 in 6 victims was 12 years old or younger** at the time of their first sextortion experience.¹⁶ Children in this age group are especially at risk because they may not yet have the emotional awareness to identify manipulation or the confidence to reach out for help when targeted.



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