For parents and caregivers

Keeping kids safe online starts with a conversation.



You don't need to be a tech expert. You need to be the person your child comes to when something feels wrong. This guide shows you how.

Start a conversation | Explore topics

Pick a topic

Short, practical answers to the questions parents ask most.

UNDERSTAND

How grooming works

The seven stages, from first message to secrecy.

NOTICE

Warning signs

Changes in your child and red flags in a contact.

SET UP

Apps and games

Where risk lives and the settings to change.

PREPARE

Sextortion

What it is, and what to tell your child today.

TALK

Conversation starters

Questions to ask, sorted by age.

ACT

If something happens

Step by step, what to do and not do.

UNDERSTAND

How online grooming works

Grooming is a slow, deliberate process where an adult builds trust with a child so they can later exploit them. It rarely looks dangerous at the start.

1

Contact in a public space

A game, group chat or comment section that feels normal and safe.

2

Building trust

Compliments, attention and gifts like game currency. They may pretend to be a kid.

3

Moving somewhere private

A request to chat on another app. One of the clearest warning signs.

4

Isolation

They become the only one who "really understands" the child.

5

Secrecy

"Don't tell your parents." Secrets are a groomer's main tool.

6

Testing boundaries

Jokes and questions that slowly become sexual.

7

Exploitation and control

Requests for images or meetings, sometimes with threats.

Grooming happens offline too. Most children who are abused are harmed by someone they already know: a coach, family friend, relative or youth leader. The same pattern of attention, gifts, secrecy and isolation applies.

NOTICE

Warning signs

No single sign proves something is wrong. Look for patterns and check in gently.

Changes in your child

- Secretive about devices, or switches screens when you walk in
- New apps, accounts or a second phone
- Gifts, money or game currency you can't explain
- More time online, especially late at night
- Anxious, withdrawn or upset after being online
- A new, often older, "friend" you have never met
- Sexual language or knowledge beyond their age

Red flags in an online contact

- Lots of compliments and attention, very quickly
- Asks the child to keep the friendship secret
- Wants to move to a private or disappearing-message app
- Asks for photos, even "innocent" ones at first
- Asks where they live, go to school, or when they're home alone
- Offers gifts, money or game items
- Tries to come between the child and their parents

SET UP

Apps and games

The pattern to watch for: contact that starts in a public game or feed, then moves to a private chat. Set up parental controls together with your child so they understand why.

Roblox

A huge young audience, chat with strangers, and Robux gifts used to build trust.

Set up: Parental controls, chat limits and a parent PIN.

Fortnite, Minecraft and other games

Voice and text chat with strangers during play.

Set up: Turn off voice chat or limit it to friends.

Discord

Private servers and DMs, often where chats move after a game.

Set up: Family Center, and block DMs from non-friends.

Snapchat

Disappearing messages and location sharing.

Set up: Family Center, Ghost Mode on, friends-only contact.

Instagram

DMs and comments from strangers.

TikTok

Comments, DMs and livestreams.

Phones and tablets

The gateway to every app.

Set up: Teen account protections and a private account.

Set up: Family Pairing and a private account.

Set up: Screen Time or Family Link to approve downloads.

Settings change often. Check each app's family or safety center every few months.

PREPARE

Sextortion

Someone tricks or pressures a child into sending a sexual image, then threatens to share it unless they send money or more images. It mostly targets boys aged 14 to 17, often by someone posing as a teenage girl, and it can happen within hours.

If images were shared, NCMEC's free **Take It Down** can help remove them.

Tell your child this, before anything happens:

"If anyone ever threatens you online, come to me. You won't be in trouble, no matter what you sent."

"Never pay. Paying almost always leads to more demands."

"Stop replying, but don't delete anything yet. We'll save the evidence together."

"It's a crime against you, not something you did wrong. We'll handle it together."

TALK

Conversation starters

Short, regular chats beat one big talk. Pick an age, then tap a card to see why the question works.

Ages 5 to 8 | **Ages 9 to 12** | Ages 13 to 17

ASK

Has anyone you only know online asked to chat somewhere else?

Why ask this?

ASK

How can you tell if someone online is who they say they are?

Why ask this?

ASK

What would you do if someone offered you Robux or a gift card?

Why ask this?

ASK

If a friend told you something scary happened online, what would you say?

Why ask this?

If your child tells you something difficult, stay calm and thank them. Your reaction decides whether they come to you next time.

Family safety plan

- [ ] Agree your child can tell you anything online without losing their device

Work through it together. Kids follow rules they helped make.

0 of 12 done

- [ ] Keep phones and gaming devices out of bedrooms overnight
- [ ] Turn on parental controls on every device and app
- [ ] Require your approval for new app downloads
- [ ] Set accounts to private and limit messages to approved friends
- [ ] Turn off location sharing in apps
- [ ] Online friends stay online: no meetups without a parent
- [ ] Never send photos to anyone you only know online
- [ ] Know your child's usernames and the friends they play with
- [ ] Play their favorite game with them at least once
- [ ] Save the CyberTipline number: 1-800-843-5678
- [ ] Review settings and this plan every few months

ACT

If something happens

If a child is in immediate danger, **call 911**. Otherwise:

1. **Stay calm and reassure**
   They did the right thing by telling you, and they are not in trouble.
2. **Stop the contact**
   Stop replying. Don't pay or send anything.
3. **Save the evidence**
   Screenshot messages, usernames, profiles and dates. Don't delete yet.
4. **Report to NCMEC**
   report.cybertip.org or 1-800-843-5678. They route it to law enforcement.
5. **Call local police**
   Especially for threats, a planned meeting, or someone you know.
6. **Report and block**
   On the platform, after the evidence is saved.
7. **Remove images**
   Use Take It Down at takeitdown.ncmec.org.
8. **Get support**
   Talk to a pediatrician or counselor. In crisis, call or text 988.

What not to do

- Don't confront the person or investigate yourself. It can alert them and harm a police case.
- Don't forward, save or share any sexual image of a minor, even as evidence. Describe it to police.
- Don't punish your child or take their device as a reaction. It teaches them not to tell you.

Get help

Immediate danger

911

Report online exploitation

report.cybertip.org

1-800-843-5678

Remove images of a minor

Take It Down

Crisis or self-harm

Call or text 988

Missouri abuse and neglect hotline

1-800-392-3738

© 2026 Connected Identity. When a child is connected, they should be protected.

Back to connectedidentity.com