ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH AGAINST THE RISKS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

The Bottom Line

Children and youth may not understand the risks of virtual communication. Caregivers and service providers should educate themselves on these risks and implement protective measures, including speaking with children about the risks of sharing explicit content online, interacting with strangers, and manipulation tactics that may be used by online predators.

Online Child Exploitation

Children who have experienced abuse are also likely to be the victim of online sexual exploitation. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to manipulation tactics such as trauma-bonding (powerful emotional bonds with a narcissistic, manipulative abuser) and threats to making abuse disclosures. Children and youth may be led to believe the abuse is actually love, or that if they disclose the abuse they will face negative repercussions. Children of any age and any gender are at risk for sexual exploitation. Predators know where children and youth go online and may groom them, pretend to be another child of similar age, and most abuse more than one child simultaneously.

Signs and Symptoms That a Child is Being Sexually Exploited Online

- sums of unaccounted for money, including in accounts such as iTunes
- noticeable secrecy over electronic devices and/or deleted internet history
- increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and/or difficulty sleeping
- appearance numbness, hopeless, and/or seeming withdrawn
- increased substance use
- experiences of frequent psychosomatic symptoms
- noticeable weight loss/gain
- increased difficulty with memory and concentration
- difficulty managing and self-regulating emotions

Possible Responses

- Reassess risks and discuss online safety frequently, especially with children who are statistically more vulnerable to online exploitation.

- Watch for signs and symptoms of online child exploitation. Be aware that they may be receiving manipulating threats or are being blackmailed with messages, photos, and/or videos.

- When discussing online safety, be sure to mention the falsity in manipulation tactics such as trauma-bonding, threats of repercussions towards the child, and blackmail. Ensure they know that these things are illegal and telling a trusted adult will not result in the child being punished.

- Remind children not to interact online with people they do not know or have not met in person; not to send anything online that is sexual in nature or makes them uncomfortable; and if they have sent anything online that makes them uncomfortable, they will not be in any trouble if they tell a trusted adult.

- If a situation has gotten out of control for a child, they will most likely feel ashamed and embarrassed about the interaction. Ensure they know they do not have to deal with any dangerous or uncomfortable situation online alone. Remind them they are the victim, and not the one in trouble.

- Ensure that caregivers model appropriate behaviour in what they post online.

- Predators will know where to go online to find children. Be aware of apps that are most commonly used for online child sexual exploitation, such as TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and Kik, and video games that offer 'rooms' with online chat capabilities such as Roblox, Minecraft, etc.

- Always report child internet exploitation to the local police/RCMP or to Cybertip.ca. No incident is too small, and it is likely that the predator is abusing other children as well.

Protecting Children (ages 5-11)

One of the biggest risks for children online is that they may not know the power of technology. They may not understand that livestream videos can be recorded, the person they are speaking with may not be who they say they are, or that clicking on a link may take them to a dangerous or inappropriate website.

Possible Responses

- Discuss online safety using age appropriate vocabulary.

- Adults should be involved in all online activity at this age. Be considerate of the child's feelings, but ensure there is supervision on every online platform. Teach the child to always ask permission before downloading online content. Set parental controls where possible. Choose options such as YouTube kids, as opposed to YouTube.

- Check the terms and conditions of each app the child uses. This will give you the age that the app is appropriate for to make decisions accordingly.

- Ensure children understand that live streaming over video can be recorded, even if they do not know it is being recorded.

- Ensure children know not to click on any links when playing games online.

- Many apps have a GPS setting that allows for others to see the child's location. Ensure this is turned off where it does not need to be turned on. Set limits on Wi-Fi or phone time so the child is not going online without supervision.

- If a child discloses online sexual exploitation, ensure they know that they are brave and did the right thing by telling a trusted person. This will help them understand that good things can come out of involving an adult.

Protecting Children and Adolescents (ages 12-17)

Sexting - such as sending naked photos known as 'nudes' - is the most common form of online exploitation for youth. Adolescents may make risky decisions during development in their search for belonging. Many youth think sexting is normal and therefore safe, and believe they are exempt from the risks of 'sextortion'. Youth may also not understand that something posted on the internet is permanently traceable, even after it is deleted.

Possible Responses

- Finding balance between online supervision and not invading a youth's privacy can be challenging. Adults should be as involved in the youth's online personal life as they are in the youth's offline personal life.

- Advise the youth to be wary of tactics others may use to manipulate them into sexting. These tactics can include flattery; being pitiful to try and gain a sympathetic response; sharing sexual explicit material in an attempt to normalize the behaviour; persistence; threats; and deception such as hiding their true identity.

- Share the 'grandma rule' with youth. This rule suggests that no one should post anything online that they would not want their grandmother (or future boss, future in-laws, beloved mentor, etc.) to see.

- Ensure youth know that distributing nudes is considered distributing child pornography and is against the law. Make sure it is understood that this means the youth cannot distribute naked photos of their peers and that their peers cannot distribute naked photos of them.

- Inform the youth of the 'blame the caregiver' tactic (e.g. "I can't send that. My [caregiver/mom/dad] goes through my phone every night").

- Share stories found online and - if comfortable to do so - personal experiences with the youth to show that online exploitation is real, dangerous, and can happen to anyone if precautions are not taken.

Caregivers, service providers, and children may not know how to discuss internet child exploitation or how to handle the situation if it arises. There are many websites dedicated to protecting and educating children, youth, and adults on the risks of online child exploitation. Most include a number or link to assist in reporting a cybercrime:

- Cybertip.ca - Report child internet exploitation directly. Provides information and many resources on internet child exploitation, categorized by age group.

- Needhelpnow.ca - Report sextortion directly. Provides information on internet exploitation and recognizing when things have gone too far, how youth can request images/videos be removed from websites, and tips for involving a safe adult.

- Dontgetsextorted.ca - Education on sextortion, ways to avoid manipulation tactics, and what to do if it has occurred.

- ProtectKidsOnline.ca - Information on online risks and solutions, categorized by age group (ages 5-15).

- Protectchildren.ca - Information on internet child sexual exploitation and direct support for families, service providers, and survivors.

- Zoeandmolly.ca - Teaches young children (ages 8-11) about the risks of online exploitation and how to handle it through comics, games, and quizzes.

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