UNDERSTANDING SEXTORTION:
How to Keep Kids Safe

Sextortion is a growing problem among children and teens. In this guide, we'll help parents understand sextortion and how to address the topic with children and teens.

This article discusses suicide. If you or people you know are at risk of self-harm, call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for 24-hour support.

If you or someone you know has been the victim of Sextortion, contact your local FBI field office, call 1-800-CALL-FBI, or report it online at tips.fbi.gov

The statistics are staggering...

- **12%** of 9-12-year-olds and **31%** of 13-17-year-olds agree it's normal for kids their age to share nudes [1]
- **1 in 7** of kids aged 9-17 report they have shared nudes (including 1 in 8 kids aged 9-12) [1]
- **38%** of minors blame the victim whose nudes were leaked [1]
- **1 in 5** of 9-17-year-olds report having been shown or sent someone else's nudes without their consent [1]
- **46%** of minors who shared their own nudes did so with someone they met online [1]
- **1 in 6** minors who experienced an online sexual interaction did not disclose their experience to anyone [1]

What is Sextortion?

Sextortion is a form of blackmail that involves threatening to distribute private, sensitive, or compromising images or videos of an individual unless they provide more images, money, sexual favors, or other forms of compensation.

This often occurs online, where perpetrators may manipulate victims into sharing intimate content, which is then used against them. It doesn't matter if the victim consensually provided the imagery. Sextortion is a serious crime that can have significant emotional and psychological impacts on victims.

Common examples of sextortion include:

- A teen in an online chat room befriends a criminal who pretends to be a romantic interest and asks the teen to send an intimate picture. Once the picture is received, the criminal threatens to send the picture to the teen's friends and family if they don't send more pictures.

- An ex-partner uses the threat of publishing explicit pictures to manipulate the victim to rejoin a relationship.

- Someone creates graphic AI-generated images or videos using the victim's face and threatens to put them on social media if they don't pay a specified amount of money.

These scenarios can play out in an hour or less and can lead some children or teens to take their own lives.

According to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), there has been a significant increase in sextortion cases being reported to the CyberTipline. **Teenage boys have been the most common targets.**

Expert Insight: Who Are Sextortion Perpetrators?

DEREK **BENNER**
Our Rescue Board Member

Derek Benner led the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Center for Countering Human Trafficking (CCHT)—the first unified, inter-component coordination center for countering human trafficking. He currently serves as the managing director, federal law enforcement and commercial at Thomson Reuters Special Services.

Although some people are sextorted by people they know—such as boyfriends or girlfriends—the majority of people who target children in sextortion schemes are experienced criminals trained to prey on vulnerable people.

The scammers are skilled experts

Derek Benner says, "[The perpetrators of Sextortion] are ruthless criminal organizations that have existed for years. They are cyber criminals that typically operate in regions (worldwide) that pose challenges for law enforcement."

"They most recently evolved into sextortion and blackmail by applying tactics used in other fraud and scam activity," he explains. "Before COVID, they were primarily fraud and scam organizations that exploited vulnerable populations through romance-based schemes, financial and investing schemes, and the exploitation of public benefit programs."

"These predators have a very distinct methodology for engaging potential victims," he says. "It's really about social engineering an attempt to establish a relationship. They try to form a connection or start a conversation via multiple platforms. They will research public social media profiles to gather information about their victims."

> **"The biggest aspect of this campaign is to educate children, parents, teachers, and other community leaders on how to avoid falling prey to these criminal organizations."** – Derek Benner

Sextortion became more prevalent during COVID

During the pandemic, kids were on their devices more often and parents were also adjusting to new at-home roles.

"Sextortion developed as criminal organizations and predators took advantage of the fact that children were spending more time online," says Benner. "They saw an opportunity and they pivoted very quickly. Anything and everything is a tool for these criminal organizations. They are not constrained by lack of imagination. They are merciless and persistent."

The solution is a combination of law enforcement and education

"There have been a lot of successes on the law enforcement and prosecution side," Benner explains. "Law enforcement at all levels reacted to the new trend very quickly and dedicated more resources. There are many good examples of predators being identified and extradited to the United States to face charges."

"But law enforcement is not the silver bullet for this problem—it's education," says Benner. "The biggest aspect of this campaign is to educate children, parents, teachers, and other community leaders on best practices on how to avoid falling prey to these criminal organizations."

How You Can Help

- Talk to your school administrators to create policies to address sextortion
- Contact your city leaders to provide education about sextortion in community
- Learn about revenge porn laws in your state
- Keep up with legislation and trends around AI generated images

5 Ways to Help Kids Recognize and Avoid Sextortion

DR. JORDAN GREENBAUM

Survivor Care Expert

Dr. Jordan Greenbaum, former Medical Director of the Global Initiative for Child Health and Well-Being at the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, spent her clinical career caring for abused, exploited, and trafficked children, and providing international training and technical assistance to professionals in this field.

1. Introduce body safety and internet safety early

"Internet safety should be incorporated into general safety conversations that starts at 3, 4, and 5 years old in developmentally appropriate ways," says Dr. Jordan Greenbaum. "If we wait until sextortion is starting to happen at 11-13-years-old, it's too late."

"For example, teaching four-year-olds the names of body private parts, talking about the concept of boundaries for one's own body, the boundaries of someone else's body, and the need for consent," she says. "For example, it's okay to say 'no' to someone who wants to give you a hug, and you should respect the rights of others who don't want to be touched."

"Start talking about getting online and internet safety as soon as children begin to go online," says Dr. Greenbaum.

"That way, by the time they begin to interact with others online, internet safety has become routine, and they know that their bodies are their own," she adds. "[When kids] are clear about consent, it's just part of the normal routine. Your body is your own, whether it's online or offline."

2. Have regular conversations about internet safety and consent

Having regular conversations about children's online activities is important. It's important to know what apps and games they have and how much time they spend on it.

**Once a week or so, have conversations about internet safety. Here are some discussion starters:**

- What are your favorite apps? Why do you like them? Who is on them with you?
- Can you show me how to use your favorite app or play games you like online?
- Have you met new people online who have become friends? Tell me about them. How did you meet? What you like/don't like about the relationship?
- Has anyone you've talked to online ever asked you to do something that made you feel uncomfortable or bad?
- Let's say they asked you to send them a photo of you naked, and that didn't feel right to you. What could you say to them? (Then, talk about ways to refuse the request.)
- If something happened online that made you feel bad, scared, or worried, what would you do? (Then talk about the need to go to a trusted adult for help, even if the child feels responsible for what happened. Emphasize your desire to protect and support the child if they are in distress.)
- Do you think sending pictures of your private parts to people you like is ok? Why or why not?
- Did you know that it is illegal to share nude photos of people under the age of 18, even if the person is ok with it?

Signs that a child may be at risk for sextortion

Tweens and teens love their privacy. But when kids take online privacy to extremes, it might be a sign of sextortion.

Potential signs of online exploitation include:
- Being very secretive when online or hiding screens from adults.
- Sudden unexplained changes in behavior such as sadness, withdrawal, or difficulty controlling emotions.
- Becoming uncharacteristically possessive of their devices and distressed if prevented from using them.
- Becoming anxious or upset when receiving texts or other messages.
- Marked changes in internet behavior (e.g., major increases or sudden suspension of social media use).
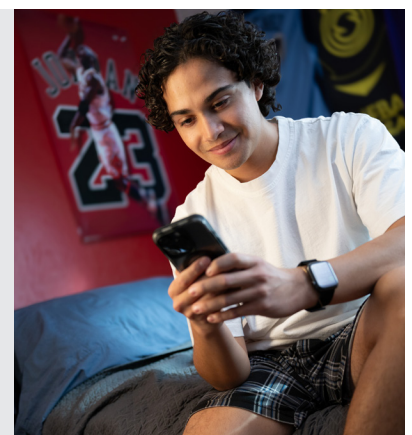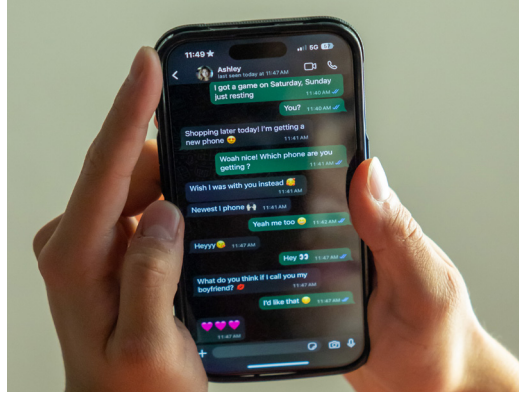
3. Prepare kids for encounters with sextortionists online

"Parents (or trusted adults) need to acknowledge that children may find themselves in high-risk situations," says Dr. Greenbaum. "Children can meet people online in a number of ways. And very quickly the child may come to view this person as friend, not a stranger."

Dr. Greenbaum explains, "A person intending to exploit a child typically works to determine what the child needs (or wants) and supplies that. You need love? I will give you love. Do you need someone to tell you you're pretty? I'll tell you you're pretty."

Fulfilling needs and demonstrating interest and caring allows the offender to build trust with the child. Friendly conversations can gradually become more sexualized, leading to requests for sexual photos or videos.

Teach kids to look for signs of scammers

Encourage teens and children to be suspicious of people who:
• Have profiles with no information, only one photo, or only a few friends or followers
• Give you lots of compliments and are interested in your activities
• Asks to talk on a different platform or app, instead of staying on the app where you met them
• Sends friend requests to multiple children in your school
• Requests personal information about you, such as your location or family members
• Offers to send you gifts
• Asks you for sexually explicit images [2]

Encourage kids to ask a parent or trusted adult if they are unsure if someone is a scammer.

4. Help kids know what to say when asked for sexual imagery

When an "online friend" asks a child or teen for sexual photos there's a lot of pressure to comply. Talk to your children and teens about what they could say. For example, a kid could say:

• A firm "no way."
• "I just don't feel comfortable doing that."
• "No, that's not a smart thing to do."
• "I don't want my picture all over the internet."
• "There are other ways to show that we like each other."
• "I'll send you something else, like a picture of my dog or a fun meme."

5. Ensure your children know that you will stand by them

Although it's hard to think of a child sending nude pictures to someone online, it can happen—even with the most responsible kids. It's critical to tell your kids that you will be in their corner, no matter what.

Tell children and teens:

• If you have sent pictures of your body to someone you met online, and something bad happens, you can come to me.
• This can happen to anyone—even adults.
• I will support you.
• I won't be angry. I won't punish you.
• We'll work together to get through it.

What to do if a child is a victim of online sextortion

When a child or adolescent is a victim of sextortion, they feel trapped, isolated, and scared. Be sure to thank them for coming to you for help and support.

What to do first

- **Listen** and allow the child to share their experiences.
- **Reassure the child that he/she is not in trouble**, and you will help them get through this situation. Remind the child that he or she is not alone, and other kids have experienced this, too.
- **Explain** what will happen next, such as calling law enforcement, notifying the school, etc.

Collect evidence and block the blackmailer

- Block the blackmailer on all platforms, but do not delete the child's profile.
- Do **not** view the pictures or videos.
- Do **not** erase any images, videos, texts, or websites (they are evidence). Take screenshots and save web pages as PDFs.
- Change account passwords on all platforms.
- Do **not** send money to the blackmailer.

Get law enforcement involved

Start by contacting your local law enforcement. They will likely be able get you to the resources you need quickly. You can also contact your local FBI field office, call 1-800-CALL-FBI, or visit tips.fbi.gov.

Contact the National Center for Missing Exploited Children (NCMEC)

NCMEC provides important resources for families experiencing sextortion:

- The CyberTipline (https://report.cybertip.org) is the place to report child sexual exploitation.
- Take It Down (https://takeitdown.ncmec.org) helps remove online nude, partially nude, or sexually explicit photos and videos taken before you were 18.
- NCMEC has emotional support resources for victims and families. Email gethelp@ncmec.org.

Citations:

1. Thorn. "Grooming and sextortion." www.thorn.org/research/grooming-and-sextortion/
2. Thomson Reuters. "Safe Settings." www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/our-purpose/introducing-the-safe-settings-campaign/