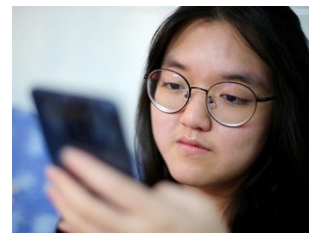**Online Child Sexual Exploitation and the NCMEC CyberTipline**

By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.

Introduction

Law enforcement continues to find that the online exploitation (and enticement) of young people has occurred in a variety of ways: across social media, on gaming platforms, through messaging apps, etc. Online enticement involves children of all ages and backgrounds.

Consequently, since 1998, the *National Center for Missing & Exploited Children* (NCMEC) has operated the CyberTipline, the United States' centralized system for reporting suspected cases of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation. The CyberTipline also provides the electronic technology service providers with the ability to make reports of suspected child sexual exploitation on their platforms.

Today, as we deal with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is noteworthy that NCMEC reported that child safety has also been affected as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. "In 2021, NCMEC stated that they had experienced a 97.5% increase in online enticement reports between January 2020 and December 2020, versus the same time period in 2019."[1]

Definitions

People who sexually abuse children are most often known and trusted by the child. This can involve intra-familial abuse within the family, or, more frequently, others outside the family who know the child—which can include someone whom — the child meets online and believes to be a "friend." The term *child sexual abuse* has a variety of definitions depending on the type of discipline involved, whether that be law enforcement, a prosecutor or private attorney, child protective services, a therapist, an advocate, a researcher, etc. Online sexual abuse also has several applicable phrases and definitions:

- ***Online enticement*** covers a wide gamut of child victimization; it has been described as an individual communicating with a person whom he or she believes to be a minor, via electronic technology, with the intent to commit a sexual offense (such as enticing a child to share sexual images of themselves, engaging in sexual communication, distributing a child's sexual images as a trade or for profit, meeting a child in-person for sexual reasons, "blackmailing"/sextortion, etc.). This is the terminology that most widely identifies how children can be sexually abused or exploited through technological means.
- *The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* (UNODC) reports that ***online child sexual exploitation*** occurs when communication technology is used as a means to sexually abuse and/or sexually exploit children.[2]
- The *National Sexual Violence Resource Center* defines online ***child sexual exploitation*** as sexual harassment, exposition, or abuse that takes place though screens.[3]

Methods of Online Enticement

When conversing utilizing technology, child abusers use a variety of methods to groom and manipulate children and young people, such as:

- Developing a positive rapport with the victim, often through compliments, praise, discussing "shared" interests, acting caring/empathic, and "liking" or commenting on the victim's online posts

- Listening to and sympathizing with the victim's problems or insecurities by expressing a willingness to be available at any hour
- Asking (initially) for non-sexual photos of the victim
- Buying (or promising to buy) the victim goods/gifts or substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs, cigarettes), sending a gift card, distributing, or sharing gaming-types of tokens or advantages through gaming platforms
- Asking the victim to communicate virtually using any online platform, such as *Face Time, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram*, etc.
- Preying on a victim's desire for excitement, attention, or romance, eventually shifting conversations of a sexual nature
- Sending the victim unprompted sexually explicit images of themselves
- Asking the victim for partially-clothed or sexually-explicit images of themselves
- Asking the victim to meet in person, just for a for a "date" or to "hang out"

Making a Report of Online Child Sexual Exploitation

State or county Child Protective Services (CPS) Hotlines often have strict guidelines on what types of reports they can document/accept or investigate, to include those situations where the person possibly offending against a child is acting in a "caretaker role," such as a parent, legal guardian, childcare provider, teacher, volunteer in a child-serving organization, etc. CPS's primary objective is to make sure the child is safe in their own home or with those adults who are responsible for the child's care.

Occurrences of online child sexual exploitation typically do not fit into the CPS Hotline reporting criteria, which is why there are separate reporting measures for situations that could fall under the umbrella of the online enticement of children.

One should always notify the local police (either 911 or their local non-emergency line) when you believe that a crime, such as the online sexual exploitation of (or with) a child or young person is about to be committed or has been committed. An example of these exigent circumstances would be a mother discovering her 13-year-old daughter had agreed to meet an older "friend" for a date at a local McDonalds, whom she only knows from online gaming.

NCMEC's CyberTipline, located in Alexandria, VA, operates seven days a week, 24 hours a day, accepting reports and then distributing the associated child sexual exploitation leads to the appropriate law enforcement agency for follow-up. That follow-up includes multidisciplinary teams—for instance, a national network of 61 Internet Crimes against Children Task Forces (ICAC), representing over 4,500 federal, state, and local law enforcement, dedicated to investigating, prosecuting and developing effective responses to internet crimes against children.

The types of CyberTipline child sexual exploitation reports include but are not limited to:[4]

- Online enticement or grooming of children for sexual acts
- Pornographic material (sexualized and/or sexually explicit content) sent online to children
- Pornographic or sexually explicit material depicting children
- Traveling to engage in sexual activity involving a child
- Online sexual extortion or blackmail of children (sextortion)
- Possession, manufacture and distribution of child pornography (better referred to as "child sexual abuse material" or CSAM)
- Child victims of what might appear to be prostitution or sex trafficking
- Sex tourism involving child victims

Anyone can make a report to the [CyberTipline](#),[5] including caring adults, parents, teachers, or young people. To make a report, one would start by documenting everything that occurred. By way of example:

- Screen capture (grab a visual of) the evidence of any conversations between the victim and the abuser.
- Make sure to capture the username and time stamps of any conversations and exactly what was said.
- Copy/paste any links that depict children within sexualized content or positions.
- Archive/save any photos or videos that the abuser uploaded to the victim.
- Determine if the abuser has communicated with the victim either by calling or texting the victim's cell phone.
- Do not report the abuser's account(s) to the social media or other platforms until you speak with the CyberTipline law enforcement agency referral source.

Once you've made the online report through NCMEC, a representative may follow up with you to provide guidance as to how and when to report to social media or any other online platform. This is important, as once a report is made to the online platform, the abuser's account will be shut down and may inadvertently alert the abuser that he/she has been reported.

The CyberTipline receives reports of child sexual exploitation incidents via an online form which is at: https://report.cybertip.org/. NCMEC also maintains a 24-hour hotline at 1-800-843-5678.

One must always remember that a report to the CyberTipline does not fulfill a mandated reporter's state reporting requirement to notify child protective services or local law enforcement when there is reason to believe that a child has been abused, is being abused, or is in danger of being abused. In this case, a report must be made to child protective services or local law enforcement, in addition to the CyberTipline.

Prevention Tips

There are actions that caring adults can take to help protect children and young people from online sexual exploitation:

- Have frequent conversations with the children and young people in your care regarding the risks, and the benefits, of online communication.
- When interacting with children and youth online, maintain safe and transparent communication.
- Monitor technology used by the children and youth in your care, and install filtering software.
- Never allow a child or young person to meet in person with someone they have only "met" online, unless accompanied by a parent or safe adult.
- Be attentive to child and youth behavior, and any behavioral cues they may be exhibiting (such as sudden changes in behavior, extreme moodiness, secretiveness, or isolating from others) to illustrate that something is not right.
- Know who children and youth are communicating with using technology.

Conclusion

Remember that the social networking and online gaming landscape is constantly changing and technology is rapidly evolving. Adults cannot be complacent. Caring adults, parents, teachers and all of us who are charged with protecting children must continue our efforts to stay informed of the technology used both by minors and the child abusers who are seeking to manipulate and abuse our children. By maintaining a high level of awareness, and communicating when you have a concern, you can help protect the children, youth and vulnerable in your community.