**Protecting God's Children for Adults**

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# Online Exploitation: What is it and what can we do?

By Katie Boller Gosewisch

The internet has transformed how we learn, connect, and communicate. For children and



teens, it offers opportunities for education and social connection. But the same digital spaces that make connection easy can also be used to cause harm. One of the most serious and growing risks facing children today is online exploitation.

### What is online exploitation?

Online exploitation refers to the use of the internet or digital technology to sexually exploit children. While there are many ways this can occur, more common examples include grooming a child for sexual abuse, coercing them into sharing explicit images or videos, livestreaming abusive acts, or using online contact to eventually facilitate in-person abuse or sex trafficking. It can happen through social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps, livestreams, and even seemingly harmless online communities.

In some cases, children may be pressured or manipulated into sharing sexual content of themselves. In others, traffickers or abusers use online spaces to identify vulnerable children and gradually build trust before escalating to abuse.

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The Importance of Child Abuse Prevention Month—All Year Long

**Katie Boller Gosewisch**

Katie Boller Gosewisch is the Executive Director of the Alliance to End Human Trafficking (AEHT), where she began leading the organization's mission to end trafficking and exploitation in May 2022. With a career spanning over 20 years in the nonprofit sector, Katie is deeply committed to serving vulnerable populations, emphasizing advocacy, community engagement, and access to resources. Her experience, including executive leadership roles at Living at Home Network and WeCab, reflect her dedication to impactful service. Katie holds graduate and undergraduate degrees in both history and theology, underscoring the foundation of her work in faith and the principles of justice and dignity. At AEHT, she uses her expertise to further education, advocacy, and survivor support, striving for a world free of human trafficking. For more information on the Alliance to End Human Trafficking please visit https://alliancetoendhumantrafficking.org/.

While online exploitation can affect children of any background, those experiencing isolation, family instability, mental health challenges, or unmet emotional needs have increased vulnerability.

In the United States, reports of online child sexual exploitation have increased dramatically in recent years. Advances in technology—such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), the ability to connect online through gaming and social media, combined with increased screen time—have created more opportunities for abusers to reach children. Abusers will also utilize sextortion by threatening to release sexualized images or videos of the child, unless the victim pays the abuser money, sends more explicit content or performs sexual acts

**Online exploitation as a form of child sexual abuse**

To be clear: *online exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse*. While this form of abuse may begin behind a screen, its impacts are real and can lead to serious long-term harm. Even when the contact may not be in-person, physical contact—any sexual manipulation of a child is abusive. Coercing a child to send explicit images or videos, engaging them in sexual conversations, or encouraging online sexual behavior violates a child's safety and dignity, and can also cause psychological harm. Children and youth who experience online exploitation can experience many negative effects, including trauma, anxiety, depression, shame, and impacts on relationships and self-worth.

In many cases, online exploitation is also connected to other forms of abuse. Online grooming can lead to in-person sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation, or sex trafficking. What begins as seemingly innocent online contact can escalate over time, making early awareness and prevention critical.

**How grooming happens online**

Online grooming rarely begins with obvious red flags. Instead, it often unfolds gradually, using trust and emotional manipulation.

Adults who groom children online may:

- Target children who appear lonely, insecure, or eager for attention
- Initially present themselves as peers, mentors, or supportive adults
- Offer compliments, gifts, in-game rewards, or emotional support

- Ask personal or intimate questions and encourage secrecy
- Gradually introduce sexual topics, jokes, or requests
- Normalize boundary-crossing behavior over time

Grooming is intentional and strategic. The main goal is to lower a child's defenses and make inappropriate behavior feel normal or deserved, so that the abuse can more easily be accomplished. Children may not recognize what is happening, and many feel confused, ashamed, or afraid to tell someone—especially if they have been threatened.

Unfortunately, with the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, videos can be generated that look and sound like a real person. Children may be victimized through AI-generated videos and photos that have also been used in sextortion cases or even as "revenge" porn. There have also been many cases of children or youth creating sexually exploitative images or videos of their peers using AI.

**Behavioral indicators of online exploitation**

While no single behavioral indicator proves exploitation is occurring, changes in a youth's behavior can signal that something is wrong. Behavioral indicators showing that a child or youth may be experiencing online exploitation include when the child:

- Displays sudden secrecy around devices or online activity
- Withdraws from family or friends
- Has unexplained or expensive gifts, money, or online credits
- Experiences emotional distress, anxiety, or mood changes after being online
- Talks about a new "friend" they refuse to identify
- Uses sexualized language or has behavior that seems age-inappropriate
- Has declining grades and frequent unexplained school absences
- Has unexplained changes in cash flow, gifts, online credits, clothing or accessories
- Has a secret cellphone
- Has a much older boy/girl friend
- Has physical injuries or other signs of physical harm
- Suddenly displays a change of character
- Displays tattoos or burn brands of someone's name, symbol or initials on their body, or through jewelry

These indicators can be difficult to notice and

may overlap with normal developmental changes. What matters most is paying attention, staying engaged, and creating space for open conversation. One way to begin an open-ended conversation is to start by telling the child what you observed, and ask if they can tell you more about that.

**What safe adults can do to help prevent online exploitation**

Preventing online exploitation does not involve the extreme of prohibiting electronics or fear-based rules. It starts with trust, communication, and education.

- **Create open conversations**. Children should know they can talk to safe adults about anything they encounter online without fear of punishment. Regular, age-appropriate conversations about online behavior help normalize asking questions and seeking help.
- **Teach boundaries**. Children should understand that they never owe anyone personal information, images, or secrecy—online or offline. Reinforce that adults should never ask children for sexual content or private conversations, and if they do, the child should tell a safe adult right away.
- **Stay involved**. Know the platforms children are using and how they work. Stay informed and engaged.
- **Model healthy digital behavior**. Children learn from adults. Demonstrating respectful communication, privacy awareness, and a balanced approach to technology sets an example.
- **Trust your instincts**. If something feels off, it is worth paying attention. Asking open-ended questions can open the door to important conversations.

**What to do if you suspect online exploitation**

If you suspect a child may be experiencing online exploitation, take it seriously. Stay calm, listen without judgment, and reassure the child that they are not in trouble.
Preserve evidence when possible (such as if the child shows you a text message or social media direct message) and report concerns to local law enforcement or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC) CyberTipline, available at CyberTipline.org.

Tell the youth around you that mistakes online can happen, and that if they need help, they can come to you for anything. Many children feel so ashamed of online victimization that they don't

seek help. Let them know, ahead of time, that if they're fearful of any mistakes regarding published images or videos, there are tools that can help. For example, the "Take it Down Act of 2025" is a free service that requires platforms to remove images within 48 hours. To remove images from the internet, visit https://takeitdown.ncmec.org/. Additionally, seeking professional support, from counselors, advocates, or child protection resources, can help both the child—and the adults supporting them—navigate next steps safely

**Moving forward together**

Online exploitation is complex and deeply troubling, but prevention is possible, as well as coordinated efforts to mitigate the effects of online mistakes. By understanding how exploitation happens, recognizing behavioral indicators, and fostering safe, trusting relationships, adults can play a critical role in protecting children. Children deserve to explore the world, online and offline, without fear of harm. Creating safer digital spaces starts with informed, attentive safe adults who are willing to listen, learn, and act when it matters most.[1]

**Footnote**
1 For more information on this topic and how to get involved, visit the AllianceToEndHumanTrafficking.org.

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**1) If you become aware of a behavioral indicator that a child or youth may be experiencing online exploitation, what should you do?**

A) ◯ Ask the child open-ended questions, starting with what you observed and if they can tell you more about that.

B) ◯ Say nothing to the child but start asking all of their friends what's going on with them.

C) ◯ Contact the child's parents and tell them how they are bad parents because something clearly happened to their child.

D) ◯ All of the above.

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