



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

How to protect kids from exploitation



By Jane Sutter

While most Americans think of the U.S. Secret Service as the men and women who protect the president of the United States, they also protect children.

Surprised? “Since the passage of the Omnibus Crime Bill Act in 1994, the Secret Service has been authorized to provide forensic and technical support to state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies across the country, as well as at the request of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC),” explained Special Agent Brittany Hayes of the Secret Service on a recent webinar.

The Children’s Safety Network, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, sponsored the webinar on “National Child Exploitation Prevention Programming.”

The Secret Service is one of the first federal agencies co-located at NCMEC. The Secret Service partners with NCMEC to bring a variety of programs to kids and parents.

One of their efforts is the Childhood Smart Program, the Secret Service’s prevention and education effort to help protect youth from online exploitation and abduction. “NCMEC statistics show that perpetrators are attempting to reach children at

prepubescent ages,” Hayes said. “That’s why NCMEC and the Secret Service place a high value on reaching children in elementary grades. One of the main resources we use is NetSmartz, which is NCMEC’s internet safety curriculum ... We focus on empowering children to speak up when they encounter something online that makes them feel sad, scared or confused—helping them identify what they can do in the moment and how to find a trusted adult for support.”

Hayes noted that parents often ask during presentations how to start having conversations with their kids about

internet safety. "That can be hard – sometimes it's difficult to get more than a one-word answer about how school went." Hayes suggested that parents utilize the guides and tipsheets that are part of NetSmartz. "In my presentations, I always emphasize communication: no software, monitoring tools or parental controls will catch everything. The strongest protective factor is an ongoing, open line of communication, paired with helping children identify trusted adults they can go to when something feels wrong."

Know to Protect Campaign

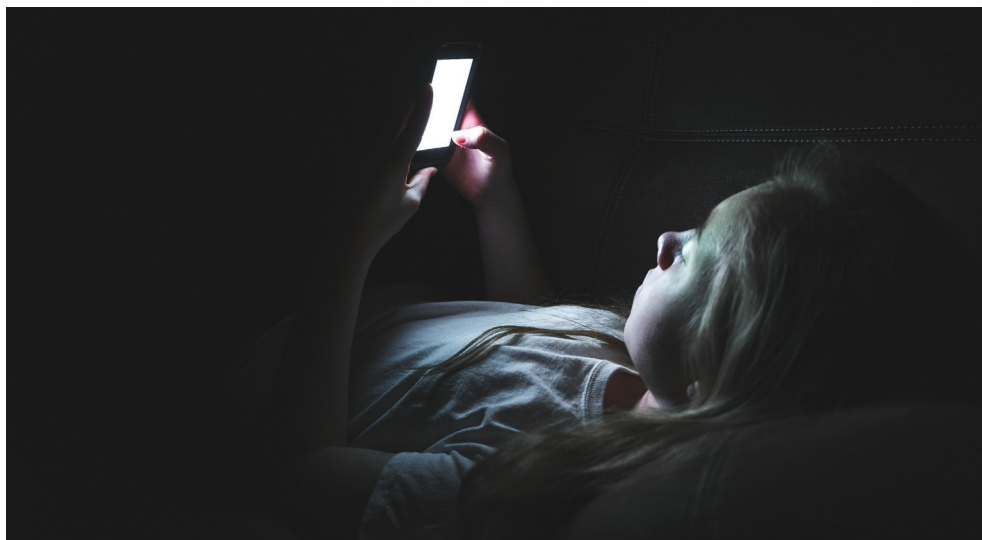
The Department of Homeland Security has established a "Know to Protect" campaign with the tagline "Together we can stop online child exploitation." In the fiscal year 2025, Homeland Security recovered 6,488 child victims, said Renee Young, a forensic interview specialist with DHS, who also participated in the webinar. Young said there were more than 1,660 convictions and 48,105 individuals were arrested for online crimes against children in the fiscal year 2025.

DHS has seen an increase in end-to-end encryption, which makes detection and reporting much more difficult, Young said.

"One of our agents in Seattle described it well: Kids are in a virtual playground," Young said. "Just as we are professionals at our jobs, the people harming children online are professionals too. They go where kids are, then attempt to move them to more sinister platforms or even toward in-person contact. That's why it will take all of us to combat these crimes."

DHS offers an in-person internet safety program called Project iGuardian, presented for small and large groups, such as churches, classes, 4-H clubs, etc., Young said. "A unique strength of iGuardian is that the people presenting are the people working these cases — special agents, forensic interview specialists, victim assistance specialists and others. We weave in local case examples to show communities that these crimes aren't just something you see in a movie; they happen in our own backyards."

Young cited as an example a tragedy that happened as a result of online



Childhood Smart Program

The Forensic Services Division of the Secret Service established the Childhood Smart Program (CSP) as an initiative to educate families and communities regarding internet safety and abduction preventions. The CSP is a partnership with NCMEC (which has a Rochester office) in which the Secret Service delivers educational resources that focus on age-appropriate real world and internet safety presentations to children in classrooms, camps, community events, etc. Topics include online enticement, child sextortion, cyber bullying, child sex trafficking and child abduction. To request a free presentation, email fsdncmec@uss.s.dhs.gov.

Project iGuardian

The Department of Homeland Security offers an in-person internet safety program called Project iGuardian, which is offered to schools, clubs, churches, etc. The intended audience is parents, teens or tweens. The presenters are people who work child exploitation cases, such as special agents, forensic interview specialists, victim assistance specialists and others. The presentation includes a set of characters meant to be approachable and memorable, such as the most popular character, Homeland Security Investigator Captain Canine Mojo. To request a free presentation, email the Project iGuardian team at iGuardian.hq@hsi.dhs.gov.

RESPOND APPROPRIATELY

If a kid or teen becomes a victim of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), here's what you can do:

- Remain calm. Kids and teens are victims in these situations, and it's not their fault.
- Ensure that they know they are not alone and that there is a way out. An increasing number of U.S. teen boys who were victims of online sextortion have committed suicide, so offering solidarity, empathy and hope is vital.
- Stop communicating with the online predator and save all evidence in its original form, such as images, videos and messages. Do not alter, change or delete anything.
- Contact law enforcement and ensure they can access the device. Visit Know2Protect's How2Report page to learn more.

Get more tips for supporting a kid or teen you care about on Know2Protect's Survivor Support page. To report an incident, you can call the Know2Protect Tipline at 1-833-591-KNOW (5669) or visit the NCMEC CyberTipline at <https://report.cybertip.org>.

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exploitation — the suicide of a 16-year-old named Walker Montgomery in the state of Mississippi in 2022. According to USA Today, Montgomery took his own life after a random “sextortion” encounter on Instagram.

The news article states that Walker was direct messaged by someone posing as a female, wanting to participate in a sexual encounter. The person on the other end of the encounter recorded the episode and then threatened to send copies to all of Walker’s family and friends if he didn’t pay them \$1,000. After Walker’s suicide, a forensic analysis of his phone revealed the scheme. The IP address of the hacker was from Nigeria.

Walker’s father, Brian, is now working with DHS to raise awareness about the dangers facing children online, Young said, sharing this quote from Brian: “I see it as a fight. I see it as a war. There’s a war on our kids. We have no other defense other than awareness right now.”

Online enticement

A major issue showing up in NCMEC statistics is online enticement, Hayes said. She described it as “when a child engages with someone online they may not know, and that person attempts to get the child to leave their home or meet them outside.”

The number of cases of sextortion is increasing significantly, Hayes said. “We’re seeing young people, especially boys ages 13 to 17, being targeted, though it can happen to girls as well. We’re also seeing the growing impact of generative AI. And it’s important to say clearly: Even if it is created using artificial intelligence, if it depicts child sexual abuse material, it is still child sexual abuse material.”

Hayes defined sextortion as when someone uses sexual images to extort a victim — often for money. For example, a young person may be playing a game on a platform, and they think they’re talking to someone their age. That person may encourage them to move the conversation to a private messaging app and then pressure them to share a nude or sexual image, promising to send one back.

“Once the image is sent, the reality is often

RESPOND APPROPRIATELY

Connect:

Set some ground rules. Establish clear guidelines like what types of sites kids can visit, apps they can download, and when they can have access to electronics. Consider “blackout” periods that require disconnection.

Research before you buy. It’s important to learn about a device’s capability before you buy it. Will it allow unknown people to communicate with my child? Will this allow children to make unchecked purchases?

Go beyond safeguards. Installing monitoring software doesn’t guarantee your child will be safe online. Time, attention and active conversation are the best tools to protect them.

Report! If your kids are dealing with cyberbullies or potential online enticement, report it to the website, cell phone provider, law enforcement or CyberTipline.org.

Learn:

Know the platforms. Online enticement happens across all platforms, so be aware of the sites, games and apps your children frequent. Ask them to show you how they use them.

Be proactive. Teach your kids to spot common tricks used by online offenders. In Cyber Tipline reports from the NCMEC, the most common tactics used to entice a child online were:

- Engaging the child in sexual conversation/roleplay as a grooming method.
 - Directly asking the child for sexually explicit images of themselves or offering to mutually exchange images.
 - Developing a rapport with the child through compliments and other supportive behaviors such as “liking” their online posts.
 - Sending unprompted sexually explicit images of themselves.
 - Pretending to be younger.
 - Offering incentives for explicit content.
- Spot the red flags. A child who is experiencing online enticement may be:
- Spending increasing time online.
 - Getting upset when he or she is not allowed on their device.
 - Taking extra steps to conceal what they are doing online.
 - Receiving gifts from people you don’t know.

Engage:

Talk about it. Your kids may not tell you everything but ask anyway. Regular conversations about safety can go a long way to increase trust and communication.

Get involved. Challenge them to a duel. If you have kids who like to play online games, ask if you can play too. When you respect their interests, they are more likely to respect their rules.

Don’t pull the plug. Taking away internet access because they may have made mistakes online doesn’t solve the problem. Talk to them about protecting themselves and respecting others online:

Source: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. For more helpful information, go to NetSmartz Home

that the person isn’t who they claimed to be,” Hayes said. “The perpetrator may immediately escalate and demand money — through Cash App, gift cards or other methods, threatening to share the image with the victim’s family and friends if they don’t pay. That is sextortion and we are seeing it affect many youth.”

Young encourages parents to learn how to turn off location services in online games, understand how location is shared in apps, and how it can appear in photos or posts.

Jane Sutter is a Rochester-based freelance writer.



5 FIVE WAYS

to protect your children from sexual abuse

Parents play the primary role in educating their children about sexual abuse. Here are 5 tips for teaching safety to the little ones God has entrusted to you.

1

Keep it practical. Teach your children the differences between safe touches and unsafe touches.

2

Tell your children that saying “no” is okay. Empower your children to say “no” if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable or touches them inappropriately.

3

Give your children a way to alert you. Tell your children they can use an excuse or share a special “code-word” with you to alert you about an unsafe person or situation.

4

Tell your children to report an unsafe touch.

Let your children know they should tell you if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe around any adult or peer. You can also identify other adults they can tell about unsafe touches.

5

Tell your children you trust them. If your child makes a report to you, believe him or her. Tell them it is not their fault and that you love them. Immediately bring the allegation to the attention of public authorities.



Promise to Protect

Pledge to Heal



ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Tammy Sylvester,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228,
or Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimsassistance@dor.org.

All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepSAFE.org/>
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6