

Last month, I wrote about the dangers we all face online due to criminals seeking to use COVID-19 as a smokescreen for their crimes. This month, I'd like to specifically talk about the dangers facing our children as they are online. Cybercriminals are very aware of the fact that children and teens are spending more time online due to distance learning in their schools and social distancing measures limiting activities outside the home. Of particular concern are child sexual predators who may try to use this increased online presence of children as an opportunity to lure victims into their criminal behavior. Online predators routinely lurk on social media sites popular with children. Their goal is to cultivate an online relationship with a child they can exploit to obtain graphic images or even, in rare cases, an in-person meeting with the child. These predators almost universally begin their contact with children by pretending to be another child or young adult. The criminal will do their best to gain the trust of the victim and exploit that trust to convince the victim to send them graphic images. If the criminal cannot convince the victim to voluntarily provide images, the criminal may work to obtain embarrassing information the criminal can use as leverage to extort graphic images from the victim or threaten the victim or the victim's family if the victim refuses to comply with the criminal's demands. Many of these predators are skilled manipulators and can leave any child or teen feeling like they have no choice but to comply. Involved parents are a child's best defense against these online predators. The FBI recommends parents take the following steps to safeguard their children against online exploitation:

- Discuss Internet safety with children of all ages when they engage in online activity.
- Review and approve games and apps before they are downloaded.
- Make sure privacy settings are set to the strictest level possible for online gaming systems and electronic devices.
- Monitor your children's use of the Internet; keep electronic devices in an open, common room of the house.
- Check your children's profiles and what they post online.
- Explain to your children that images posted online will be permanently on the Internet.
- Make sure children know that anyone who asks a child to engage in sexually explicit activity online should be reported to a parent, guardian, or other trusted adult and law enforcement.
- Remember that victims should not be afraid to tell law enforcement if they are being sexually exploited. It is not a crime for a child to send sexually explicit images to someone if they are compelled or coerced to do so.

While it is not uncommon in today's world for children to have friends whom they only know through online contacts, make sure your children maintain a healthy skepticism about these online only friends. Children need to know how easy it is for someone to pretend to be something or someone they are not while online. Children need to know that online friends are not the same as the friends they know from their community and that they should be more careful about what personal information they share with online friends. Most importantly, children need to be able to talk to an adult in their life if someone on the internet makes them feel uncomfortable.

The connections we gain by using technology and the internet are very important, especially in today's world. Electronic devices and social media can be great tools for keeping children connected to their school, friends, and family. However, like any other activity our children engage in, we need to explain to them the rules and cautions of online interactions to keep them safe.

For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.