



SAFE CONNECTIONS

A Guide to Protecting
Your Child from Online
Grooming

THORN ¹

Many of us remember being taught about “stranger danger” as kids.

It seemed fairly straightforward at the time: Be careful around strangers. Avoid talking to people you don't know.

But in this digital age, socializing has completely changed – and risks have, too. The majority of young people make new friends online every day. They don't know these individuals, but they don't consider them strangers either.

So where does this leave caregivers, educators, and platforms when it comes to understanding online grooming? What happens when online interactions cause the line between “stranger” and “friend” to disappear?

It's important for parents to understand what grooming looks like and to teach kids how to deal with risky encounters with new connections online – preferably before their kids have access to devices and platforms that let them chat and connect with others.

Helping kids distinguish safe online relationships from risky ones is key, as is providing tools for knowing when and how to ask for help, or to cut things off.

This guide has you covered.

From our conversations with kids, we've heard that online-only connections can be very deep and meaningful: **1 in 3 (32%) minors reported having online-only contacts they consider among their closest friends;** in fact, only 14% of minors categorized their online-only contacts as “strangers.” This tells us that “stranger danger” messaging no longer works to educate youth.

Source:
[Online Grooming Report](#)

What You Can Do Now

1 Reframe “strangers” with a digital lens

Kids regularly interact with their real-life friends online, so it doesn't seem quite as weird when a new person might start playing a game with them or likes a photo that they share.

It's increasingly normal to make friends online, so avoid framing conversations regarding people they don't know in real life as being “strangers.”

Instead, focus on red flags and behaviors that may indicate that someone has bad intentions. Start helping them understand what to look out for early. Talk about it often – and consider implementing parental controls.



2

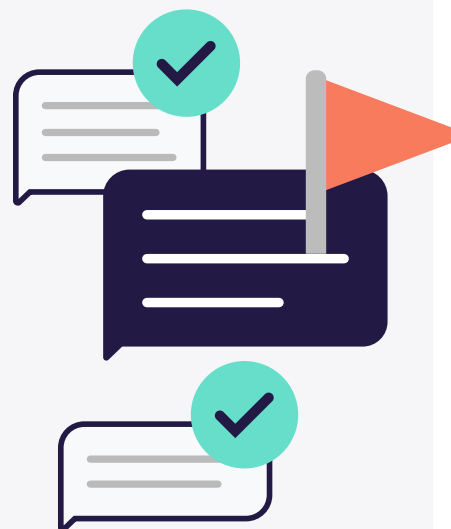
Learn about online grooming and teach your child to recognize red flags

Online grooming can happen quickly or over time, but at its core it's a process of exploiting trust to shift expectations of what safe behavior is and leveraging fear and shame to keep a child silent.

Start by learning the red flags and identify inflection points to weave them into conversations. Leverage offline safety concepts like recognizing the difference between safe and "tricky" people and explain how it's even easier for people online to pretend to be someone they aren't.

THESE RESOURCES CAN GET YOU STARTED:

- [What is online grooming?](#)
- [Tips & Tricks to Stay Safe from Creepers - Love146](#)
- [A video to watch with your child](#)



The Stages of Grooming

STAGE

DESCRIPTION

Source: [InHope – The Stages of Grooming](#)

STAGE	DESCRIPTION
Targeting the Child	A groomer targets children by creating false profiles on the internet, often by pretending to be a child within the same age group and initiating contact online. Oftentimes, groomers will target children within their close friend or family circle.
Gaining Access	The groomer establishes trust with the child by making them feel special, sometimes through gifts or excessive compliments and attention. This is especially dangerous for vulnerable children who do not experience attention in their daily lives.
Developing Trust	The groomer becomes a consistent presence in the child's life and establishes the appearance of a friendly or even romantic relationship. Children are mostly oblivious to the dangerous nature of these relationships as the groomer actively works to blur the lines between normal and abnormal relationships.
Desensitizing to Sexual Content	When a certain level of trust is established the groomer starts to desensitize the child to sexual content – e.g., by exposing the child to sexual content – in order to facilitate an environment for child sexual abuse (CSA) and child sexual exploitation.
Maintaining Control	Groomers often use secrecy and feelings of shame to maintain control over the child. In some cases, groomers might utilize self-generated intimate content to extort children into prolonging the abusive relationship.

3 Dig into Discussion Playbooks

Start a dialogue about what online interactions should and shouldn't look like. Talk about how to cut off contact and help them understand they can come to you for help when they need it.

Build upon earlier skills, ensuring they have an understanding of what online grooming is. As their relationships become more private, make sure they know it's never their fault if someone tricks them, threatens, or betrays them, and that you'll always be there for them.



CHECK OUT THESE HELPFUL RESOURCES TO HELP GUIDE YOU:

- [Smartphone Safety - National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#)
- [Learn How to Reframe "Stranger Danger"](#)
- [Protecting Kids From Identity Theft - Connect Safely](#)

Scroll to the next section to get started with two discussion playbooks.

4 Keep Talking

As kids get older, they will begin to build stronger communities online. This is a normal and healthy part of development. These communities may consist of a mix of people they know offline, friends they've made online, and people they don't know at all. Keep the dialogue going to build their skills to recognize risky interactions so they can safely interact with others as their device independence grows.

Build skills by talking through scenarios like, "What would you do if an online friend asked where you lived?" This way, your child can practice recognizing red flags and when to get help.



DISCUSSION PLAYBOOK

Starting to Make “Friends” Online

As our children’s worlds expand and become increasingly digital, it’s important for us as parents to adapt and guide them through their online experiences.

One key aspect of their digital exploration is making friends online, a natural progression for them as they develop socially. Just as they’re inclined to engage in group activities and form friendships in the physical world, they’ll also express interest in doing so online. However, the online space presents a unique set of challenges that necessitates a shift in how we approach discussions about friendship, trust, and safety.

In this section, we will guide you through understanding and teaching your child about online friendships, how to navigate interactions with others in the digital realm, and how to recognize potential risks.

Why talking about this is important

Today’s kids are interested in making friends and engaging in group activities. It is completely normal for them to want to connect with others online via group games. While it’s best to disable chat and direct messaging for younger kids, start teaching kids these basic ideas before they have an opportunity to chat with a stranger online.

These tips will help you...

- ✓ Help your child understand that people and situations online aren’t always as they seem.
- ✓ Talk to your child about what not to share with people they don’t know in real life.
- ✓ Teach your child to talk to a trusted adult if someone makes them uncomfortable.

What to expect from your kid

Younger kids are likely forthcoming and willing to share. Balance the conversation with both the good and the bad about online interactions as you navigate various levels of access to online friends together.

This includes talking to an adult if something makes them uncomfortable, even if it’s someone they know.

How to start talking

It’s important to distinguish between in-person friends, online friends, and strangers early on. It can be tricky for kids (and even adults) to tell the difference when interacting with other people online.

Key moments to start talking

- Playing their first game with their friends online
- Asking you to download a new app or game for them
- They start asking about when they can have social media platforms

Conversation starters

Here are some questions you can ask your child to get the conversation going – and flowing.

- Has anyone tried to talk to you while playing your games?
- Have you seen people chatting in any of your games?
- How is meeting people online different from friends you meet at school?
- Do you think people are the same online as they are in real life?
- Have you ever messaged with someone online that you don't know in person?
- What have you shared about yourself with someone you met online?
- What's *not* okay to share with someone you've met online?

LET'S PLAY THIS OUT

When your child responds with "someone sent me a message once."

Parent: Has anyone tried to talk or chat with you online or in one of your games?

Child: Someone sent me a message once but I didn't understand it, so I kept playing.

Parent: Why might people want to chat with each other during games?

Child: To make friends or learn new things about the game.

Parent: That sounds like fun. Do you think it's safe to talk to anyone that talks to you online?

Child: I guess so.

Parent: Well, there are nice people online and some people that aren't nice or hurt other people. It can be really hard to tell the difference when you are just chatting online. People might not always tell the truth about who they are.

Child: You mean like bad guys?

Parent: Kind of. it's just hard to really know who someone is online without knowing them in person first. It's important that you never share information or pictures with someone you don't know in person. My goal is to always keep you safe, healthy, and feeling comfortable when you're online. Will you tell me if anyone makes you uncomfortable, scares you, or tries to ask me any of these questions? Remember, this shouldn't happen even if you know that person in real life. You know you can always come to me, no matter what, okay?

GOAL: Start to build the foundation that things aren't always as they seem online, set a baseline expectation to avoid talking to people they don't know in person, and make sure they know to come to you if anyone they don't know tries to talk to them.

LET'S PLAY THIS OUT**When your child says they've never received a message from a stranger.**

Parent: Has anyone tried to talk or chat with you online or in one of your games?

Child: No.

Parent: What would you do if someone you didn't know tried to talk to you?

Child: I might talk to them if they seem nice.

Parent: How would you know if they are nice or not nice?

Child: I don't know.

Parent: Well, there are nice people online and some people that aren't nice or try to hurt other people. It can be really hard to tell the difference when you are just chatting online. People might not always tell the truth about who they are, or they may seem nice at first and then turn mean.

Child: You mean like bad guys?

Parent: Kind of. It's hard to really know who someone is online without knowing them first. You might be talking to someone you thought was nice, but it turns out they maybe weren't telling the truth about who they are. It's important that you never share information or pictures with someone online. My goal is to always keep you safe, healthy, and feeling comfortable when you're online. Can you tell me if someone you don't know tries to talk to you online, and I can make sure it's okay?

GOAL: Start to build the foundation that things aren't always as they seem online before kids encounter strangers online. Set a baseline expectation to avoid talking to people they don't know in person and that they should come to you if anyone they don't know tries to talk to them.

LET'S PLAY THIS OUT

When your child says they have received messages from strangers.

Parent: Has anyone tried to talk or chat with you online or in one of your games?

Child: Yes, someone wanted to trade cards or buy x but I said no.

Parent: Did they try to talk to you after that?

Child: They asked a couple more times but I didn't want to trade so they went away.

Parent: Has anyone ever made you feel uncomfortable when they talked to you online?

Child: No.

Parent: Do you think it's safe to talk to anyone that talks to you online?

Child: No, some people may be weird.

Parent: What types of people are safe to talk to and which ones aren't?

Child: If they bug me, I probably shouldn't talk to them.

Parent: Right, that's one way. Well, there are nice people online and some people that

aren't nice or hurt other people. It can be really hard to tell the difference when you are just chatting online. Some people may seem nice at first but then turn mean. Or pretend they are your age when they are really not. It's just hard to really know who someone is online without knowing them in person first.

Child: Yeah.

Parent: It's really important that you don't share information with people online like your name, where you live or any personal pictures. My goal is to always keep you safe, healthy, and feeling comfortable when you're online. Can you tell me if someone you don't know tries to talk to you online or makes you feel uncomfortable, and I can make sure it's okay?

GOAL: Continue to share more guidance with kids about why someone might not be what they seem, what information to avoid sharing, and when to come to you for help.

DISCUSSION PLAYBOOK

What is Grooming?

“Strangers” look different online – often like friends – which makes risky interactions with people kids meet there an important ongoing discussion. Make sure kids know they don’t have to handle this on their own, and that they won’t get in trouble if they come to you.

Why talking about this is important

Thorn research shows that **1 in 3 young people** said that the friends they make online are among their closest confidants. That’s why it’s important to have conversations that help kids understand the difference between a safe connection and a risky one.

Online grooming can happen quickly or over time, but at its core it’s a process of exploiting trust to shift expectations of what safe behavior is, while leveraging fear and shame to keep a child silent.

Recent Thorn research about grooming indicated that **nearly half of all kids online (40%)** have been approached by someone who they thought was attempting to “befriend and manipulate” them.

While you are having these conversations, remember to avoid shame. Parents and trusted adults can support their kids and help change our victim-blaming culture by affirming that their kids are never at fault if someone abuses, betrays, or tricks them.

These tips will help you...

- ✓ Have an open dialogue and talk to your child about what it means to trust someone.
- ✓ Proactively teach your child how to recognize red flags and what to do if someone is weird or mean to them online.
- ✓ Create a safe space and make sure your child knows they can always come to you.

What to expect from your kid

Your child may have become used to talking to people online – friends, grandparents, etc. – and therefore might be quick to trust other people, without seeing any potential dangers. Walk them through possible signs that a person online is not trustworthy.

How to start talking

Though you may have had “stranger danger” discussions about people kids may encounter in real life, it’s important to reframe the conversation to address the types of encounters, rather than the individuals.

Key moments to start talking

- After you FaceTime with a friend or family member.
 - When they mention playing a game online with their friends.
 - When they ask you to download a new game for them that has chat functionality.
 - When they are watching videos that include comment functionality.
-

Conversation starters

Here are some questions you can ask your child to get the conversation going – and flowing.

- How often do you talk to people online?
- Do you ever play games like [INSERT GAME] with people you don’t know?
- Do you have any friends that you’ve met online?
- Has anyone ever made you feel weird or nervous online?
- Have you or your friends had anyone online ask you for private information?
- Do you know what to do if someone is talking to you online and makes you feel weird?
- Do you know how to identify if someone is not who they say they are?
- Do you know what to do if someone is being weird to you and won’t leave you alone?
- How do you know when you can trust someone?
- Do you know what to do if someone started out being nice to you, but then turned mean?

LET'S PLAY THIS OUT**Your child doesn't know what they would do if they felt uncomfortable in a conversation online.**

Parent: What would you do if someone was being weird to you or made you feel uncomfortable?

Child: I don't know.

Parent: Unfortunately, sometimes bad people pretend to be good people online. Someone could start out being nice but could turn weird, or even mean. I want you to know that people like this exist online and dealing with these situations doesn't feel good, especially on your

own. It may feel uncomfortable, but come to me right away if someone online makes you feel weird or upset, and we will figure it out together, okay?

GOAL: Make sure your child knows to always come to you if they have an unwanted or unsafe interaction with someone online.

LET'S PLAY THIS OUT**Your child says they would ask someone to stop if they felt uncomfortable in a conversation online.**

Parent: What would you do if someone was being weird to you or made you feel uncomfortable?

Child: I would ask them to stop.

Parent: That's good. I'm so glad you are comfortable telling someone no. What if they didn't stop though, and they kept bothering you?

Child: Oh, I don't know.

Parent: Unfortunately, sometimes bad people pretend to be good people online. Someone could start out being nice but

could turn weird or even mean. I want you to know that people like this exist online and dealing with these situations doesn't feel good, especially on your own. It may feel uncomfortable, but come to me right away if someone online makes you feel weird or upset, and we will figure it out together, okay?

GOAL: Make sure your child knows to always come to you if someone is being weird, making them uncomfortable, or harassing them.

You've started the conversations and discovered your child has been groomed online and shared intimate images of themselves. They may be experiencing sextortion.

THIS IS HARD, BUT YOU'RE ALREADY DOING GREAT BY BEING HERE.

Your children are safer because of your support and guidance through all of life's challenges. Safety in the digital age is new, and chances are your children feel more comfortable navigating digital communities than you do, while knowing less than they need to stay safe.

There are a few things you can do to help your child avoid getting into tricky, and sometimes dangerous, situations like sextortion:

My mom told me it wouldn't be the end of the world if it did happen and we would get through it.

FEMALE, 18, SEXTORTION SURVIVOR

DEFINITION

Sextortion is when someone blackmails / threatens to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something they don't want to do, like send more photos or send money. Learning about how sextortion happens and what to do to protect your child is an important step in guiding a dialogue to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

Your Next Steps

1 Be there unconditionally and remove shame.

- Kids experiencing sextortion are so scared of getting in trouble. They're worried about shaming their parents, that they'll get suspended from school, judged by friends, or in trouble with the police. These fears can even be suggested by the abuser to maintain control over them, and sadly these things do happen. This keeps kids silent, and that silence has led to self-harm and terrible tragedies.
- In an attempt to warn our children of the risks, we can inadvertently shame or blame them for the harmful action of others by saying things like, "You shouldn't have done this in the first place." This approach can compound the potential for harm and lead kids to try to handle situations that are beyond their control.

- It is important to talk to your young person in a way that shows support and removes blame, guilt, and shame. Saying things like, “I told you so”, “Why didn’t you...”, or “This is what happens when...” can bring up a lot of shame and embarrassment and prevent young folks from talking to adults in challenging situations. Avoid using a judgmental tone and instead use phrases like, “How are you feeling?,” “We can get through this together,” and “It’s not your fault – the person sending you threats is committing a crime”.

Your fear and frustration is normal, but they need to know you’ll always get through tough situations together. Even if you think they know you’ll support them, [having these conversations](#) can make a big difference in them sharing their experiences with you when something feels off or goes wrong.

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Report sextortion to the platform(s) and the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#).

- Make a report to NCMEC via their cybertipline at report.cybertip.org. They work hard to keep young people safe, and will make the report available to law enforcement.
- Report any abusive or harassing messages to the platform (app, game, etc.). Most platforms allow you to block messages from a specific user. Tech companies can help remove images and in some cases remove the threats. You can report the people threatening you, their threats, and the images if they’ve been shared. This [removal guide](#) has steps to make reports on many major platforms. Note: If the person targeted by sextortion is under 18, make sure the platform knows that (even if their profile has a different age). It helps companies to know that they are legally still a minor and to take more aggressive action to help you.

3

Save everything.

- Block the blackmailer, but do not delete the profile or messages. This probably feels like the opposite of what you were thinking, but keep everything that is being said to the victim and that the victim has said. This will help show someone what happened instead of just relying on memory. Save texts, pictures, videos, websites, etc. You can take screenshots and save web pages as PDFs. Save everything just in case and change account passwords.

Tips you can share with kids

If you or your friends are being threatened or “blackmailed” online, [here’s what you can do](#):

1. You’re not alone.

Know that this is not your fault. The blackmailer is to blame – they are committing a crime.

2. Don’t pay.

Take control and stop responding immediately. Get help instead of paying money or otherwise complying with the blackmailer. Cooperating or paying rarely stops their threats.

3. Talk to someone.

Talk with someone you trust. Text “THORN” to 741-741 to speak confidentially with a trained counselor.

4. Save everything.

Block the blackmailer, but do not delete your profile or messages.

5. Report sextortion to the platform.

[This removal guide](#) has steps to make reports on many major platforms.

6. Report sextortion to NCMEC’s Cybertipline.

Go to report.cybertip.org.

7. Secure your accounts.

Change all of your passwords.

8. There is hope.

Remember that it will be OK, and you are capable of getting to the other side of this.

Watch [this video](#) together and let your kids know that sextortion can make people feel isolated and scared. Encourage them to reach out to their friends and let them know [they’ll always have their back](#). Remember, you are not alone in this.

Looking for more resources to be your kids’ safety net?

Head to parents.thorn.org