

In these unprecedented times, families may not be aware of the increased risks that await their children online.

The FBI issued a statement warning that during this time there is an increased “on-line” presence by our children and offenders are taking advantage of this situation. Offenders are using all forms of online communication – Internet chat rooms, platforms, and social media apps – bringing themselves not only into our homes but literally into our children’s hands. This creates a heightened risk of sexual exploitation, coercion through sextortion, and enticement for sexual purposes from the safety of your home.

<https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation>

“Online sexual exploitation comes in many forms. Individuals may coerce victims into providing sexually explicit images or videos of themselves, often in compliance with offenders’ threats to post the images publicly or send the images to victims’ friends and family,” according to the FBI press release.

According to the FBI, sextortion is a serious crime that occurs when someone threatens to distribute your private and sensitive material if you don’t provide them images of a sexual nature, sexual favors, or money. **<https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/sextortion-brochure.pdf/view>**









“Parents who are educated can wage a worthy defense against potential recruitment and recruitment of their youth online,” Dr. Celia Williamson said. ***“Parents who work to build healthy, open and communicative relationships are more likely to have youth that share information about where they go and who they talk to online.”***

(UT professor of social work and director of the UT Human Trafficking and Social Justice Institute.)



SOCIAL MEDIA APPS KIDS USE

Social media apps change all the time. Although most have an age requirement of at least 13 years old, kids can circumvent that requirement, and few verify age. **This is not an inclusive list, and it is recommended parents review their children’s apps on a regular basis.**

-  **Facebook** - <https://www.facebook.com>
Kids can still be at risk of meeting and communicating with people they don’t know.
-  **Instagram** - <https://www.instagram.com>
Sensitive photos can be hacked, kids can be bullied and see inappropriate content and navigate to other apps.
-  **Kik** - <https://www.kik.com>
Can be anonymous, contact and direct message, unlimited access to anyone.
-  **SnapChat** - <https://www.snapchat.com>
Privacy & security risks, messages can be screenshot
-  **TikTok** - <https://www.tiktok.com>
No age verification, inappropriate language/content, public domain; comments can be negative and body specific.
-  **Twitter** - <https://twitter.com>
Tweets are stored and live forever.
-  **WhatsApp** - <https://www.whatsapp.com>
May be exposed to inappropriate, secretive content, anyone can talk to them or cyberbully them.
-  **YouTube** - <https://www.youtube.com>
Can access inappropriate content.

For additional resources on how to help safeguard your children and family, go to:
<https://childrescuecoalition.org/education/>

If you cannot read the material, please contact PBSO at 561-688-3080 to request an alternate format.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION / SEX TRAFFICKING



**Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office
Ric L. Bradshaw, Sheriff**

HOW IS THE VICTIM TRICKED?

Children are adept at communicating using social media. They love selfies and putting themselves out there. If they're having issues at home, they may express them openly. When they're sad or insecure, they post that too. They look for affirmation and acceptance from their peers, not realizing they may be drawing a different audience. They could be trying to find the love of their life or someone to understand them and make them feel better about themselves.



The offender preys on this vulnerability. If the child is lonely, the offender makes them feel valued and special. If the child is feeling insecure, the offender tells them how beautiful they are. The child may be tricked or coerced into sending photos or text and may even agree to meet in person. Once that happens, the offender can use coercion and threats to keep the child trapped.

"I see it a lot. In pretty much every situation of trafficking I've seen unfold there's some element of social media, whether it's someone being recruited or advertised."

Lauren Hersh, the Director of Anti-Trafficking Policy and Advocacy at Sanctuary for Families. (M-A Chronicle, April 2, 2017)

HOW DOES THE OFFENDER OPERATE?

Using social media apps and platforms, the offender can set up profiles using a false identity or be completely anonymous. On some apps, private messaging is available, and messages disappear over time. A 2018 study found that 55 percent of domestic minor sex trafficking survivors who became victims in 2015 or later reported meeting their traffickers for the first time using text, a website, or a mobile app. (Survivor Insights The Role of Technology in Domestic Sex Trafficking THORN in collaboration with Dr. Vanessa Bouché, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Texas Christian University).

The offender trolls their victims, looking for posts relating to substance abuse, runaway incidents, and unstable home life. They may even use a simple ruse of someone looking for a date. Once they have the child hooked, they promise to take care of them, and change their lives. They tell them they're beautiful; they promise to protect them. They may even promise they love the child. They may offer a modeling opportunity or other glamorous career, give them gifts or provide other services, like hair and nails. They establish the personal connection over time, which then allows them to coerce and manipulate the child into working for them.

Once the grooming process is complete, the offender may convince the victim to send risqué photos and then uses the photos to extort the victim. Through fear of repercussions, the offender compels the victim.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES?

Educate yourself by becoming familiar with social media apps and platforms, including **Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok.**

Teach your children not everyone online has good intentions. This is a tough lesson for kids to learn, especially when they think they have everything under control.

Make sure that all social media accounts are set to private, including your own. That allows for one layer of defense for children connecting with people who may mean them harm.

Put aside your judgment and blame knowing your child was probably tricked into this relationship. They need your support now. They may feel embarrassed and hurt by what happened or may be in denial and not want to accept it.

Children may not tell if they think they will be punished, or you'll be mad at them. They may also fear you'll take away their devices as punishment. That may sound like a solution, but it will not stop children from finding a way to get online.

Most importantly, tell your children they can come to you or another trusted adult if they need help.

Contact the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office at **561-688-3400** if you suspect suspicious online activity.

To report an online child sexual exploitation offense, call **911** or go to <https://report.cybertip.org>