

Help for Parents in Keeping Their Children Safe Online

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Online safety is a regular topic of conversation everywhere. Whether it is about a child's compulsive gaming, cyber bullying, obsession with social media or worse: online extortion or sextortion. It all causes stress and worry for parents and school staff alike.

I do not consider myself an expert in this area at all, however as a school division social worker, in contact with over 5000 students, a mother to four young adults, aunt to seven and pseudo parent to many others I have had my share of youth telling me their personal stories of the challenges and dangers they experience online. I also regularly communicate with mental health professionals, law enforcement, child protection workers and Cybertip (Canada's national tip line for reporting online exploitation of children) who have similar concerns.

Disturbing statistics

- Cybertip and the RCMP saw an **88%** increase in sextortion reports between 2022 and 2023 in Canada.
- Cybertip received **2500** sextortion reports between January 1, 2023 and December 2023
- 91% of sextortion incidents affected boys between 12 - 20 years old
- According to [The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#), between 2021 and 2023, reports of online enticement have increased by 323%.

It is impossible for parents to oversee all their child's online activity. Social media platforms and online video games can have unsupervised access to children 24-7. How can parents possibly stay up to date on the best parental control software available or be savvy on every video game and app that could be dangerous? It is daunting to think where to start in protecting the most precious and vulnerable members of our society.

What are the best ways a parent can protect their child?

TALK TO THEM. Not to instill fear, but to teach them to be WISE, PRUDENT and SENSIBLE. Reassure them that no matter what, they can ALWAYS talk to you. Have open, honest, lighthearted and frequent conversations with your child at whatever age you first hand them a device that can connect to the internet. Two and three years old is not too young to talk about safety everywhere in your little one's life, even internet safety.

KNOW THE PASSWORDS and go through devices regularly. It is your right and responsibility (after all, you are most likely the one who paid for the device and whose name is on the account).

PRACTICE GOOD DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP and guide your child on healthy relationships and boundaries online, no different than when you teach them to be a good friend in their offline

world. Show them how to report and block profiles that appear harmful or inappropriate. An excellent and thorough resource for families is [Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#).

FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS AND ACTIVITIES OFFLINE to have a healthy balance for everyone in the family. Face to face conversations will always trump screen time.

Signs your child may be a target of online child exploitation

New “friends”

New things - material items or digital items like new apps or video games

More time online than usual

More secretive

Unexpected language

More emotional or volatile

Change in appearance

Where to go for help if you suspect your child has been targeted online

Tell your child to never comply with any requests for pictures, money, etc.

Screenshot the message, report any and all extortion activities to the platform your child is using and block the user.

Complete a report to [cybertip.ca](#) or <tel:1-866-658-9022>

Report to the police

For more support go to [needhelpnow.ca](#)

When a person has been victimized online, they can feel alone, ashamed and desperate. It is important that they are supported. For more help [Kids Help Phone](#), [Recovery Alberta](#) or Canada Suicide Hotline 988.

This article was written by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public Schools Division's Social Worker. She advocates for students and parents, providing a link to other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for over 25 years and is a mother to 3 university students and 1 in high school.