Online Grooming

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Young people are quick to embrace and explore the online world, but parents should be aware of the risks.

What is online 'grooming'?

Online 'grooming' is where an adult sexual predator tries to lower a young person's inhibitions, or heighten their curiosity regarding sex, with the aim of eventually meeting them in person for the purposes of sexual activity.

The process may start with sending pornographic images to 'normalise' the discussion of sexual activities, and then move to requests for naked images or to perform a sex act on a webcam.

This can take place via all forms of digital technologies. Social media, gaming sites, email, instant messaging programs, forums and chat rooms with a young person and gain their trust.

Who is at risk?

Online predators will focus on those who are vulnerable. Social networking sites are designed to share personal information, providing a way for online offenders to 'target' those who make themselves vulnerable, for example, by not having privacy settings in place.

Young people are naturally curious and will engage in online discussions about things that they would not openly discuss in the real world.

Children may make poor decisions about allowing people into their online lives, believing that those who are 'nice' online will be the same in the real world. Teenagers are particularly at risk because they often use the computer unsupervised and are more likely than younger children to seek out and participate in online discussions about sexual activity.

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What to do

It is very important to talk to your child about these issues, so that they know that you are aware of things they may confront in their online lives. Let them know:

- they can tell you about any problems they are having or if someone online makes them feel uncomfortable
- it is OK to trust their instincts
- if something feels odd or strange then it probably is
- 'Good friends' don't make them do things that make them feel uncomfortable.

Check that your child has all the security settings in place for social networking sites to protect their online privacy.

Warning signs

Signs your child could be at risk include:

- You find pornography on your child's computer. Online predators may send pornographic images in order to 'normalise' their requests for pictures.
- Your child is receiving or making calls to numbers that you don't recognise.
- Your child is spending an increasing and/ or an excessive amount of time online.
- Your child is receiving unexplained gifts (mobile phones or extra credit vouchers are common).
- Your child is becoming withdrawn and there is a distinct change in their behaviour.
- Your child is becoming more secretive in what they are doing online and is trying to 'hide' what they are doing online.
- There are people on your child's 'friends' list that you do not know and your child has never met offline.

Police Assistance

If you are at all concerned about the possibility of your child being the victim of an online sexual predator please contact the police for advice and assistance.

If you believe your or any child is in immediate danger please phone **000**.

If you are concerned about online behaviour involving the sexual explotation of a child you can report it online to the Australian Federal Police, **www.afp.gov.au**.