

Social Media

An Update for Parents



“On its own, social media is not dangerous. It’s the manner in which it’s used that can be the problem.”

~ Lori Getz,
Cyber Education Consultant

Social Media: A Powerful Tool

Social media is a powerful tool that has changed the way we interact with the world around us. Research shows that social media platforms can have positive effects on social and intellectual development in young people. Even so, it’s important to be aware of the many ways this technology can also be harmful and destructive to their well-being.

As parents, we want our children to have the benefits of social media that we ourselves enjoy: the ability to communicate with family and friends no matter where they are, as well as to connect with others who share our interests. However, since it is relatively new technology, we still do not know the long-term consequences—good or bad—of social media use.

Numerous studies have shown that there is a strong link between high usage of social media and an increased risk for depression, anxiety, loneliness, as well as damage to self-confidence and self-esteem for some teens. Others report that social media helps them get support when needed. In fact, according to a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 conducted in 2022, 80% of teens reported that social media makes them feel more connected to what is going on in their friends' lives.

So although many parents would like to know whether social media is good or bad for their teen, the answer is: It can be both, depending on how it is used. This newsletter focuses on how drug dealers, criminals, and groomers are using social media to connect with young people, what can be done to minimize the risks, and what resources are available to help parents understand the scope of the problem and learn how to prevent their child from becoming a victim of online abuse.



PREVENTION SERVICES

IN THIS ISSUE

Social Media: A Powerful Tool	1
Who’s Using What Apps?	2
Messaging Apps	2
Drug Trafficking Threat	2
Sextortion	3
How Groomers Connect with Kids	3
Protect Your Child	4
More Resources	4

Popular Apps: Who's Using What?

Apps and app features change frequently, making it challenging to keep up. The Pew Research Center survey of 2022 also showed that teen boys and girls differ in their social media choices.

Teen boys are more likely than teen girls to say they use YouTube, Twitch and Reddit.



YouTube is a video-sharing service where users can watch, like, share, comment on, and upload their videos.



Twitch is a live streaming platform for gamers where users can watch other people play video games.



Reddit is a public forum; certain content may be offensive or negative to some people. It does not offer parental controls.

Teen girls are more likely than teen boys to use TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.



TikTok is a video-sharing app used to create and share short videos.



Instagram lets users post photos and videos, and send messages.



Snapchat users can exchange pictures, chats, and videos (called snaps) that are meant to disappear after that are viewed.

Messaging Apps

Even though smart phones have built-in text messaging tools, a survey by the nonpartisan and objective research organization NORC at the University of Chicago found that 40 percent of teens also use third-party messaging apps like Kik, WhatsApp, or Line to exchange messages, group chat, talk, and share videos with friends.



These apps include features such as anonymous messaging, the ability to chat with strangers, and self destructing messages, photos, and videos. These features might embolden teens, leading them to divulge too much information, participate in cyberbullying, or expose them to predators. Another concern is how these apps make it easy for teens to hide important information from parents, which could potentially get them into trouble.

Drug Trafficking Threat

Drug traffickers are using smartphones to market, buy, sell, and deliver illegal drugs, including deadly fake prescription pills that may contain fentanyl. Since fake pills look just like pills bought through a pharmacy, unsuspecting buyers think they are buying the real thing.

Dealers advertise on social media platforms—taking advantage of features like disappearing posts—and use emojis as code words for various illicit drugs in order to elude law enforcement. Buyers use direct messaging or comment on a post, and then dealers use an encrypted messaging app (like those mentioned above) to arrange the drug deal. Payment is made through one-click apps like Venmo, Zelle, Cash App, and Remitly.

The Drug Enforcement Administration has found drug traffickers using social media to conduct illicit drug sales throughout the nation: across urban, suburban, and rural communities. This relatively new trend means that smartphone apps have enabled criminal drug networks to infiltrate every area of our lives.

DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION **ONE PILL CAN KILL**

EMOJI DRUG CODE | DECODED

COMMON EMOJI CODES

FAKE PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

PERCOCET & OXYCODONE	XANAX	ADDERALL
👉 📄 📄 📄	👉 📄 📄 📄	👉 📄 📄 📄

DEALER SIGNALS

DEALER ADVERTISING	HIGH POTENCY	UNIVERSAL FOR DRUGS	LARGE BATCH
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OTHER DRUGS

METH	HEROIN	COCAINE	
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MDMA & MOLIES	MUSHROOMS	COUGH SYRUP	MARIJUANA
👉 📄 📄 📄	👉 📄 📄 📄	👉 📄 📄 📄	👉 📄 📄 📄

This reference guide is intended to give parents, caregivers, educators, and other influencers a better sense of how emojis are being used in conjunction with illegal drugs. Fake prescription pills, commonly laced with deadly fentanyl and methamphetamine, are often sold on social media and e-commerce platforms - making them available to anyone with a smartphone.

#ONEPILLKANKILL Disclaimer: These emojis reflect common examples found in DEA investigations. This list is not all-inclusive, and the images above are a representative sample.

[Click here for a copy of the DEA's **Emoji Drug Code** guide](#)

Sextortion

Sextortion is a form of blackmail where someone threatens to share intimate images of you online unless you give in to their demands, usually to send more compromising photos, to maintain contact, or to send money or gift cards, which is called financial sextortion. Sextortion schemes occur online where young people feel most comfortable—using common social media sites, gaming sites, or video chat applications that feel familiar and safe.



Predators often use fake accounts and target minors who believe they are communicating with someone their own age who is interested in a them. Once trust is gained, the predator uses flattery or offers something of value, like the possibility of a modeling contract, online game credits or codes, or money and gift cards in exchange for a “quick picture.” Some criminals even hack into computers to unearth sensitive material, or lurk in chat rooms and record young people who post or live-stream sexually explicit images and videos of themselves. Once they have a compromising picture or video, they will blackmail and threaten the child with the release of the imagery, unless the child does what they say. They may also threaten to harm the victim or the victim’s friends or relatives in order to get more pictures, video, or money.

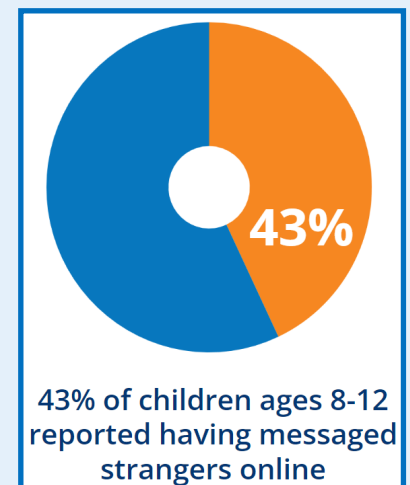
In January 2023, the FBI issued a national public safety alert warning of an “explosion” in cases of sextortion, primarily targeting minor boys. At least a dozen suicides in the US have been linked to this scheme: Adult predators, pretending to be young girls, fake romantic interest in the boys on gaming platforms, apps and social media sites. The victim responds to an online request to expose parts of his body on a webcam or send a nude photo to his new online “friend” who then threatens to expose them by publicizing the photos unless they pose for more explicit photos or send money. Many of the schemes originated outside the US in West African countries such as Nigeria and the Ivory Coast.

How Groomers Connect with Kids

Child predators will go where kids are. They are able to reach children in video-game chats, by posing as peers to create a bond with victims, or by portraying themselves as a trustworthy adult in a place where other adults are largely absent. Grooming is a way that a predator gains the trust of a child and can lead to both child sexual abuse and child sex trafficking, which is when individuals buy, trade, or sell sexual acts with a child. The National Institute of Justice estimates that 70 to 90 percent of children who are commercially exploited were sexually abused first. So the prevention of child sexual abuse may also be effective in the prevention of child sex trafficking.

The Internet has made it easier to exploit children today than it was decades ago. A predator can send out hundreds of friend requests each day. They only need one to be accepted to have access to a child. The FBI estimates that 89 percent of sexual advances directed at children occur in Internet chatrooms or through instant messaging. Groomers may share explicit content and encourage kids to model what they see. They often target those who post revealing pictures, divulge past sexual abuse, or participate in sexual talk online.

New research from *Thorn* found that 65 percent of minors said they have experienced an online-only contact inviting them to move from a public chat to a different platform for a private conversation, increasing the vulnerability and opportunities for abuse.




Protect Your Child From Groomers

Parents need to be concerned about online predators. Here are some tips to teach your child how to stay safe online.

- Talk to your child about online predators
- Discuss risky online behavior and the danger of chat rooms with your child
- Warn your child about online flirting and sending provocative selfies
- Check your child’s browser history frequently and their location and privacy settings
- Know your child’s user names and passwords and follow or friend them on social media sites
- Make it clear to your child that they can always come to you no matter what has happened



When families navigate the world of social media together, a child’s online world becomes much safer and more manageable.




NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

This site has information on Child Sex Trafficking, Online Enticement, and Sextortion, including red flags, risk factors, how to report, and an analysis of reports. It also includes information about prevention education through their online safety program NetSmartz.



ConsumerNotice.org offers a large selection of Internet Safety articles to help you educate your child about various online risks.

[Online Safety articles](#)



Clearly written guides for parents that explain popular apps, services, and platforms.

[Parent Guides](#)



[Click to watch video](#)

THORN ¹ Thorn: Digital Defenders of Children focuses on technology and the role it plays in facilitating child pornography and sexual slavery of children, while also recognizing that the internet provides invaluable opportunities for kids to explore the world beyond their doorstep. They have a number of resources for parents and kids, including this video. Here are links to Thorn webpages we recommend:

[Thorn for Parents](#)

[Online Grooming](#)

[Thorn Research Results](#)

[Stop Sextortion](#)

Additional Resources

You are your child’s most important source of information and support. The links below offer more information about sextortion.

[FBI Sextortion webpage](#)

[Homeland Security Sextortion webpage](#)

Like most other things in parenthood, there really is no manual for getting it “just right.” But with the right resources and tools, we can make strides in helping defend children from harm online – together.

Cassie Coccaro, Thorn.org