



# ALLIANCE TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Founded and Supported by U.S. Catholic Sisters

[alliancetoendhumantrafficking.org](http://alliancetoendhumantrafficking.org)

## Sexual Exploitation of Children on Social Media

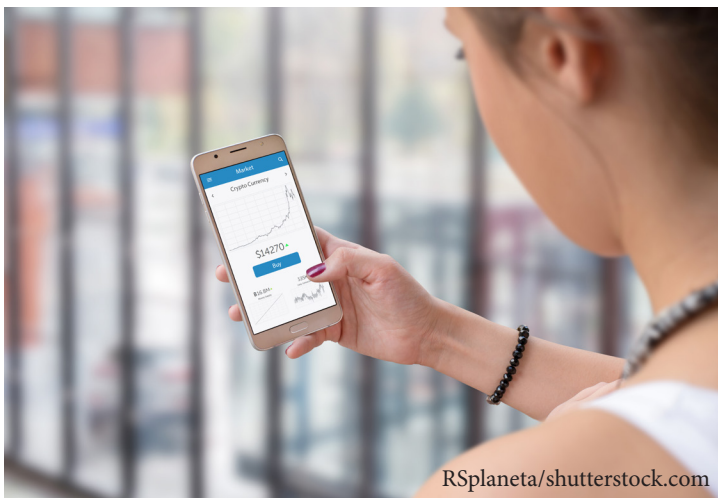
### Introduction

In the years since the launch of social media on the internet, child sexual exploitation online has become one of the biggest challenges facing society. Human traffickers increasingly turn to social media and online platforms to recruit victims for trafficking schemes. With young children being given access to devices connected to the internet, perpetrators who otherwise would not have contact with children can easily connect online with potential victims anywhere in the world.

The brains of children prompt them to seek social rewards, including attention and peer approval, which leaves them especially vulnerable to grooming by a trafficker posing as a classmate or new friend. This also makes children vulnerable to bullying and exploitation. Children who share feelings of vulnerability on social media are at higher risk of being targeted and groomed by perpetrators online. Perpetrators seek children who appear vulnerable and understand the child's vulnerabilities, telling them what they want to hear to gain their trust.

Upon gaining their trust, the predator may request or exchange explicit images or videos with children. Once the predator obtains compromising material from the child, they can use it to manipulate and blackmail the child into further exploitation or money by threatening to release the images or information. This is commonly referred to as sextortion.

This material may be used to coerce the child to meet the perpetrator in person. Once the child and the perpetrator meet in person, the child can be coerced to engage in commercial sex acts. In addition, using artificial intelligence and fake images, videos can be created from content posted on social media sites and used to extort victims.



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Any social media platforms frequented by children and young teens, such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat, to name a few, have been increasingly linked to mental health problems, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, body image concerns, and sadly, in some cases, suicide.

### Selling Children Online

Traffickers often use coded language, hidden messages, emojis, or encrypted messaging when they are selling children online. Posts carry hidden meanings understood only by those involved in trafficking.

Traffickers also communicate and are paid covertly when they commit the crime of "virtual child sex trafficking," which occurs when an offender in the United States sends a digital payment to a trafficker in another country. The trafficker will sexually abuse a child in front of a web camera while the offender in the United States watches a livestream of the abuse. Child sexual abuse, depicting the rape of infants and toddlers, bondage, humiliation through sexual assault, including self-mutilation, youth-on youth abuse, and child-on-child abuse, as well as bestiality, are not uncommon.

Online child sex offenders are increasingly moving to the Dark Web. The Dark Web is a series of anonymous networks that prevent the use of traditional means to detect, investigate, and prosecute online child sexual exploitation offenses. Some of these sites require new or prospective members to provide newly produced Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), pushing offenders further into their abuse of children.

The trauma caused by online child exploitation is compounded by the victim's knowledge that documentation of their abuse will live on the internet in perpetuity.

### What is being done?

Parents are always the first line of defense in the safety of their children. Parents need to become ever more involved with their child's online world and need to warn them that someone may pretend to be a friend but may be a trafficker. Encourage them to speak with you if they feel uncomfortable or unsure about an online interaction or if anyone asks them for personal information. Also, educate the child about the dangers of sharing personal information about themselves because people online are not always who they say they are. Using artificial intelligence, traffickers can post fake images or videos from content posted on the child's social media sites.

Parents may also set appropriate parental control, such as age and time restrictions for downloading apps. At times, the child may have two separate accounts on a social media site. Be sure to check for the second account. Children and teens use emojis as complete sentences; many have meanings unknown to adults.

The website Gabb recommends always considering the context when viewing an emoji. Does a victory sign mean a team won a soccer game, or is it intended to be a vagina? A bowl of noodles could be a request for a naked photo, and broccoli sometimes means marijuana. Emojis of food, expressions, and parts of the body form the foundation of explicit and drug-related language. Recognizing the possible meanings of emojis is necessary to help keep children away from potential perpetrators. Parents can also visit several websites to decipher what their teen is saying in cell phone text messages or social media posts.

Most importantly, maintain a trustful relationship with your children. While safety features are helpful, you should rely more on your relationship with them than filters and other safeguards. A child's safety is more important than their privacy. This is not a trust issue but a desire to love and protect your child.

Social media platforms also need to take responsibility. All social media platforms use algorithms designed to determine the type of content users see on their feeds or timelines. The algorithms collect data about users' behaviors, actions, and preferences based on the accounts they follow, the content they engage with, their search history, and demographic details, and these can be used to detect human trafficking and sex trafficking of children while ensuring the right to privacy.

Social media platforms can also develop proactive detection algorithms. These algorithms can analyze content and user behavior to identify patterns suggestive of child sexual exploitation. Additionally, platforms should establish easily accessible and anonymous reporting mechanisms that enable users to report content or activities that are suspected of child trafficking or exploitation. Anonymous reporting options encourage users to report suspicious activities without reluctance or fear.

## Actions and Resources

The [National Center on Sexual Exploitation](#) (NCOSE) publishes a “Dirty Dozen List” each year, a campaign exposing twelve mainstream entities that enable and even promote and profit from sexual abuse and exploitation. Many of these entities are tech platforms involved in some way in facilitating the sexual abuse of children. NCOSE offers numerous opportunities for action anyone can take to advocate for and impact policy change with these platforms.

[Human Trafficking Front](#) examines the many facets of social media and child sex trafficking.

[The International Justice Mission](#) *Online Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Philippines: Analysis and Recommendations for Governments, Industry, and Civil Society*

[Alliance to End Human Trafficking](#) offers opportunities for those wishing to advocate for a safer internet for children.

[Gabb](#) is committed to protecting your children with safe-tech in a digital world.

[Text Lingo: Secret Language of Teens](#) offers an up-to-date list of coded language.

*How Churches Can Protect Youth from the Explosion in Cyber Exploitation* webinar may be accessed by clicking [here](#).

## Reflection

“In order to do good, we need memory, we need courage and we need creativity... Remember that the other is not a statistic or a number. The other has a face. The ‘you’ is always a real presence, a person to take care of.” -*Pope Francis*

“We have all witnessed automated systems that risk creating these individualistic ‘spaces,’ and at times encouraging extreme behaviors. Aggressive and negative speeches are easily and rapidly spread, offering a fertile field for violence, abuse, and misinformation. On social media, different actors, often emboldened by a cloak of pseudonymity, are constantly reacting to each other. These interactions are usually markedly different from those in physical spaces, where our actions are influenced by verbal and non-verbal feedback from others.” *Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media, Pope Francis, May 2023*

“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” *Eph. 4:29*

“Social media can be a powerful tool for connection, but it can also lead to increased feelings of depression and anxiety—particularly among adolescents.” *Tochi Iroku-Malize, MD, MPH, MBA, FAAFP, President, American Academy of Family Physicians.*

“With near universal social media use by America’s young people, these apps and sites introduce profound risk and mental health harms in ways we are only now beginning to fully understand. As physicians, we see firsthand the impact of social media, particularly during adolescence— a critical period of brain development. - *Jack Resneck Jr., M.D. President, American Medical Association*

