



## **Electronic Communications and Organizations' Duty to Protect**

### **Risk Bulletin**

Around 95% of youth ages 12 and 17 use the internet daily. Internet usage may expose youth to sexual offenders, who seek contact with minors via social networking sites and apps. With changing technologies, the dynamics of abuse have also changed.

Per a report from the Michigan State Police, Instagram has become the primary means for offenders to find victims. Offenders are adopting new and fake identities to groom their victims, often pretending to be a youth themselves. The conversations may start innocent-sounding, and youth may share information about themselves to the stranger. This makes it easier for the offender to locate and identify the child. The scariest part is that they are often grooming 20 or 30 kids at a time.

Another report shares the dangers of Snapchat. Offenders use the app to send child pornography to other child offenders. They also use it to collect inappropriate photos of their victims. Police have a hard time investigating crimes on Snapchat since the security features of the app make it difficult for offenders to be caught.

Though these reports sound terrifying, the good news is that abuse is 100% preventable. The bad news is that staff and volunteers within an organization are much more likely to be trusted by a youth program participant. Organizations need to be hyper-diligent in creating safe boundaries within a "hidden" and "private" virtual space.

When we know the behaviors of youth online, the patterns of grooming, and how organizations can carry out safeguards to prevent the abuse, we can collectively work to prevent abuse.

#### **Types of Predators 101:**

There are two types of sexual offenders: preferential offenders and situational offenders.

Preferential offenders are primarily attracted to children. These offenders often first form relationships with youth offline, as they typically work or volunteer with their victims. The internet and social media platforms are tools to build a close relationship with youth in a more private space. The preferential offender will use the internet to groom their victim and make inappropriate sexual or behavioral advances.

Situational offenders do not have a primary attraction to children. They know their victim, and their relationship often starts- as innocent or professional. They may befriend them on social media or text them. However, because something is stressful in the adult's life, the offender will cross boundaries more quickly in a private setting like texting or direct messages. The relationship soon becomes inappropriate.

#### **Grooming Victims:**

Now that we identified the two main types of sexual offenders, you may wonder how grooming online works.

First, the offender uses digital communication to "access" their target. Texting, instant messaging, or social networking sites and apps are common ways to gain access to youth. The offender's end goal is to meet the youth offline for a sexual encounter.

Social media gives enough anonymity for a child to perceive it as a "safe" environment. The offender uses this private environment to build trust with the youth. The offender may affirm the feelings and choices of the youth by listening to their personal issues. They may start sending gifts or money to the youth or play into sexual curiosities. They gradually begin to violate proper boundaries, such as by discussing sex with the youth or casually sending pornography.

Once the offender has positioned a youth to be vulnerable, they have the leverage to control the child. The offender may threaten or blackmail their victims at this stage. This is a means to manipulate the minor in meeting them offline and keeping their interactions secret.

#### **Sexual Abuse Prevention of Youth:**

Sexual abuse of youth is 100% preventable. As an organization, you should use several strategies to prevent a youth in your care from becoming a victim. Strategies include:

**Youth-serving programs and organizations should define and create acceptable electronic communications policies for both staff and program participants.** Organizations should have zero-tolerance policies for inappropriate sexual behaviors. The boundaries set should be clear on what behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate and outline consequences for inappropriate behaviors. Policies should also extend to interactions between minor employees and adult employees.

For many youth-serving organizations, an electronic communications policy today might include a firm statement:

“Any private electronic communication between staff and youth, including the use of social networking websites like – Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, direct messaging, texting, etc. – is prohibited. All communication between staff and youth must be transparent.”

A review of the electronic communications policy should regularly occur to keep technology changes in mind and refresh expectations with staff and youth.

Additional information unique to the type of organization and program services offered should also be considered:

- Examples of appropriate electronic communications (i.e., only respond to emails/text/messages when copying in a supervisor or parent/guardian; only utilizing work-issues email addresses or phone numbers)
- Examples of inappropriate electronic communications (i.e., “friending or following” youth on social networking sites; engaging in sexual conversations or sharing of intimate personal information)
- Clear definitions of when staff can use their personal cell phones (i.e., emergencies, field trips, when approved by a supervisor)
- List of information or items that can or cannot be stored on staff’s personal devices (i.e., photos of youth participants)

Keeping these appropriate boundaries defined and well-known will allow you as an organization to respond swiftly. A policy violation is a red-flag behavior. Interrupting and responding to an often-innocent policy violation can deter the activity from progressing any further and may also be used as a learning opportunity for staff and volunteers.

Organizations should also communicate their electronic communication policy to parents/guardians. Having all parties understand and follow the policy will create best practices that naturally deter suspicious behavior.

#### **Youth should know the dangers and consequences of risky online behaviors.**

Around 33% of teenagers admit to being Facebook friends with people they have not met in-person. Additionally, 48% of teens say that they have received suggestive messages, and 20% of teens admit to “sexting.”

Internet safety should be taught to children from a young age and continuously through their development. They should understand the consequences of inappropriate sexual behavior online. They should also be taught the warning signs of grooming and online predators.

Youth should feel safe reporting any odd behaviors they witness or encounter online. Organizational policies should be non-judgmental and not punish the youth for reporting.

#### **Parents should understand the warning signs of abuse.**

Parents must watch their child’s access to the internet. A study found that 60% of parents view their child’s internet use; however, this number should be much higher.

Organizations should educate parents and guardians about offenders and the signs that their child may be a victim of online grooming. They should also learn appropriate questions to ask their children about their online activity.

Parents should communicate the dangers of talking to strangers online to their children.

#### **Deter, Check for and Report Abuse**

Organizations can use blocking software on their computers so that youth cannot have unlimited access to the internet. An adult staff member should monitor the usage of computers while youth use them.

Parents and staff need to take reports of any boundary violations seriously. Organizations should document concerns that any youth participants or other staff voice. They should involve the parents, and when needed, include law enforcement.

You can find your local State Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting [here](#).

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