



Warning Signs a Young Person May Be a Target of Online Sexual Abuse

How can we prevent our children from being sexually abused online?

We already know how difficult it is for children to talk about being sexually abused, whether by a man or woman or by another child. When sexually abusive behavior occurs online, some children may not even realize they are being exploited; and those who do may not tell, especially if they realize they have broken a safety rule or believe their Internet privileges may be taken away. This clearly adds another barrier to children feeling able to let someone know if they are worried about their friendships online or someone's behavior towards them. Talk frequently and honestly with your kids about experiences they may be experimenting with online, and learn the warning signs in children who may be struggling.

Some of these behaviors may be part of growing up or caused by other factors in a child's life. If you are worried, recognize that your child may be frightened, too. Talk to someone you trust, or seek the support of a professional.

Signs that a child or young person may be the target of sexual abuse online include:

Isolating themselves

- Spending increasing amounts of time on the internet.
- Becoming increasingly secretive – particularly around their use of the new technology.
- Shutting the door and hiding what they have on screen when someone enters the room.
- Not being able to talk openly about their activity online.

Becoming more possessive of their cell phone and concerned if someone else picks it up or wants to look at it.

Agitated behavior when answering their phone and needing to take calls in private.

Social changes

Developing a pattern of leaving the family home for periods of time with no explanation about where they are going.

Vague talk of a new friend but offering no further information.

Spending increasing amounts of time talking secretly with the new friend online.

Not wanting to be alone with a particular adult or young person.

Emotional changes

Sudden, unexplained personality changes and mood swings.

Outbursts of anger and irritation.

Self harming activities.

Adapted with permission from Stop It Now! UK & Ireland, The Internet and Children – What's the Problem, www.stopitnow.org.uk (<http://www.stopitnow.org.uk>)