



PARENT'S GUIDE TO

Teen

Sextortion Scams



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The FBI has reported a “huge increase” in sexortion scams targeting teens, especially boys 14 to 17.

According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, 5% of teens have been the target of sextortion, and only one-third told their parents. The research center also reported that “males were significantly more likely to have experienced sextortion (both as a victim and as an offender),” and adolescents who identified as non-heterosexual were more than twice as likely to be victims. Sextortion cases, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, “tend to have more minor victims per offender than all other child sexual exploitation offenses.”

What is sextortion?

Sextortion is a serious crime where someone threatens to distribute nude or compromising images for gain, usually financial or sexual (i.e., wanting more images or contact). Sextortion cases for financial reasons targeting teens, according to former Internet Crimes Against Children Commander Joe Laramie, are on the rise and are often perpetrated by organized crime operating outside the country.

How do the scams typically work?

Sometimes the criminal contacts a victim claiming to have their revealing photo or video. Often the criminal gets the target to produce a compromising image or video in just a few hours using flattery, threats, gifts, promises, money or by sending “their own” picture or promising to send a photo if the victim sends one.

The crime can also involve “grooming” over days or weeks, as the stranger pretends to be close to the targeted child or teen’s age and expresses interest in a relationship. The perpetrator may share an intimate photo or image and ask for one in exchange.

Sometimes the perpetrators work in teams. “We’ve seen cases,” said Cyberbullying Research Center co-director Sameer Hinduja, “where you have a girl that might be working with a man and, once the picture is sent — of course solicited by the girl — the whole act is handed over to the man who then proceeds with the sextortion.”

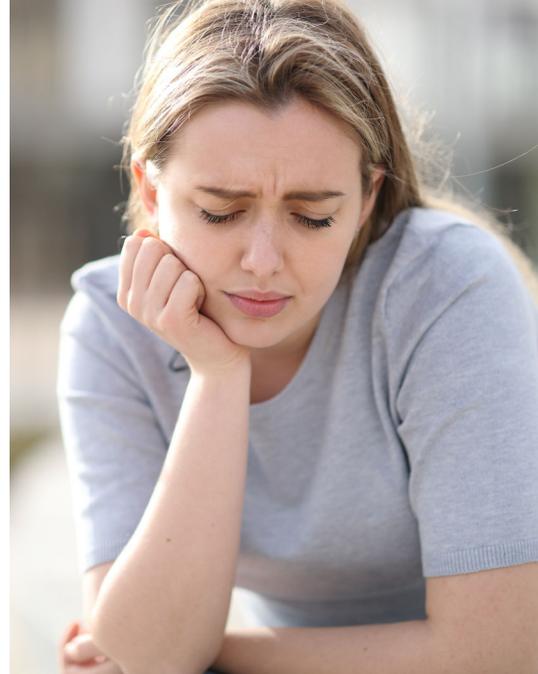
The aggressor seems to know the words in order to capture the victim’s attention, added Hinduja. “Eventually, it devolves into flirting and then, of course, the requesting of sexual images and perhaps the offering of sending their own sexual images in order to titillate the teen.”

The shame, fear, and confusion children feel when caught in this cycle often prevents them from asking for help or reporting the abuse, says the FBI. Kids are reluctant to tell their parents for many reasons, including thinking they broke the law by sharing intimate images of themselves. But, as the FBI points out to young victims, “You are not the one who is breaking the law.” The criminals are the people soliciting graphic images from a minor, and they are typically “skilled and ruthless and have honed their techniques and approaches to maximize their chances at success.”

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) has a webpage on sextortion that includes a list of “red flags” such as developing a bond with the child by establishing a friendship/romantic relationship and using multiple online identities to contact a child. There are even cases of pretending to work for a modeling agency to obtain sexual images of the child.

NCMEC lists three primary risk factors:

- A child lying about their age to access platforms where they can communicate with older individuals
- Being contacted by an individual online or offering to provide sexually explicit images to the individual in exchange for financial compensation, alcohol or drugs, gifts, etc.
- Sending sexually explicit photos or videos of oneself to another individual



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Danger from people you know

In addition to financial scams, typically perpetrated by strangers, there is also the risk that someone the teen knows, possibly a former romantic partner, could release or threaten to release nude or intimate images. In some cases, this is so-called “revenge porn,” often after a breakup, intended mainly to humiliate or exert control over the person. But there are also cases where an acquaintance engages in sextortion.

A [2017 study](#) conducted by the Crimes Against Children Research Center found that “almost 60% of respondents who were minors when sextortion occurred knew perpetrators in person, often as romantic partners. Most knowingly provided images to perpetrators (75%), but also felt pressured to do so (67%).” These incidents, according to the researchers, “often co-occurred with teen dating violence.” Unlike revenge porn, “these weren’t just episodes of trying to humiliate. These were episodes where something was being demanded: money, sex, more pictures, a return to the relationship,” said Crimes Against Children Research Center Director David Finkelhor.

Technically, any sharing of a sexually explicit image of a minor—even if consensual—can be illegal, and there have been rare cases where young people have been prosecuted for sending or receiving such images. But prosecutors mainly focus on cases where both a minor and an adult are involved or if the images or videos were taken or shared due to pressure or coercion or shared without the person’s consent. For more, see [Tips for Dealing with Teen Sexting](#).



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Protecting kids and teens

Talk openly about sextortion. Ask what they know about it, if they have ever received an explicit image they didn't ask for, and what they would do if they received one. "This is a very serious evolution of financial crime. I am not an alarmist about what happens on the internet, but I'm very alarmed about this," said Laramie, citing a handful of recent suicides by teens in the US and Canada who were victims of sextortion. "Do not wait until your child comes to you to bring this topic up. Chances are they won't, and it's your opportunity to have a real impact on protecting their online world by having that conversation."

Sextortion-related suicides are rare relative to the number of teens who have been threatened, but all young people need to know that they can and most likely will recover from significant traumas, as painful as they may be at first.

Ask them to come to you if they suspect a criminal may have targeted them. You may want to let them know proactively that they won't be in trouble if they mess up. Explain that protecting them and helping them is more important than punishing them. The criminal is counting on them to feel embarrassed, afraid, or isolated, so it's important for the teen to have backup. "Let them know that no problem is too big that you can't make it through," said Laramie.

Encourage them to block or ignore messages from strangers and never communicate with someone who wants to "meet up" on another platform.

Criminals often lure victims from a well-monitored online environment to one where dangerous messages are less likely to be detected, such as an encrypted messaging platform.



Our goal as parents should be to empower teens with the skills to make good decisions their entire lives.

Remind your children to never talk about sex with strangers. They should block anyone who says, posts, or does something that makes them feel uncomfortable.

Explain that they should never share intimate photos or videos of themselves or anyone else. Even images shared “privately” with close friends or romantic partners could either deliberately or accidentally wind up in the wrong hands. It’s especially important to never share such images with someone they don’t know from the real world. People they “meet” online may not be who they say they are.

Make sure your child uses secure and unique passwords or a password manager, which makes it easier to have very complex passwords. Also, turn on two-factor authentication wherever possible. Learn more about passwords and authentication [here](#).

If your child is targeted, let them know that they will recover from whatever embarrassment these images may cause. Your child needs to know that—as bad as they feel about this situation—it will get better. Being a victim of sextortion can be humiliating, embarrassing, and depressing. If your child is victimized, provide as much support as they need and consider consulting a mental health professional to help them recover from the trauma. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children [has advice](#) for people seeking to remove nude or sexually exploitative content taken when they were a child.

Closing thoughts for parents

As disturbing as this crime is, it’s important to put it and all online risks in perspective. Sextortion is a mostly preventable crime, and as long as your child follows the common sense advice in this guide, the chances are very low that they will be a victim, especially if they understand the risks and know how to avoid them. As uncomfortable as the conversation may be—the first step is for parents to calmly talk about prevention strategies with their children and to check in with them now and then on all aspects of their online experiences. Don’t just dwell on the negative. Encourage them to share what they love about the apps and services they use and what they do to protect their safety, security and privacy. Make it a conversation—not a lecture or inquisition—and make sure they know that you will always be there for them. Be prepared for the time your child comes to you with a problem. How you respond, both verbally and non-verbally, can be the difference in how much help your child will seek from you and others.

I'm Under 18, and I've Been Targeted for Sextortion.

What Should I Do?

Know that it is not your fault. You are the victim of a serious crime, often perpetrated by an adult who is part of an organized crime syndicate that has spent years figuring out how to scam children. In some cases, the perpetrator might be another young person, but it's still a serious crime. Talk to your parent or a trusted adult to develop a game plan.

Don't despair. Even if you're feeling scared or depressed about the situation, know that it will get better. It often helps to talk with a parent, another trusted adult, a close friend or a professional who can help and support you. You will get through this.

Contact the CyberTipline and law enforcement. Law enforcement takes these cases against minors very seriously and has been able to make some high-profile arrests. Laramie recommends first creating a case report with CyberTipline, operated by the nonprofit National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (800-843-5678 or [Cybertipline.org](https://www.cybertipline.org)).

While creating a case with the CyberTipline generates a report to law enforcement, Laramie recommends contacting your local law enforcement. If you don't get a good or quick response from them, contact your local FBI field office, which has special procedures for handling cases of sextortion of minors. Contact information can be found at [fbi.gov](https://www.fbi.gov) or the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) at [ic3.gov](https://www.ic3.gov). The FBI says not to delete anything before law enforcement can review it.

Children and teens who are not comfortable reaching out to law enforcement should seek the help of a trusted adult, a friend, or an anonymous crisis hotline or chat service, online or via phone. These can be found all over the US and in many other countries. This is a good option if you prefer to remain anonymous while exploring how to proceed, and crisis lines can often refer you to a victim advocate or other legal adviser near you. [In the US, you can search for one by zip code [here](#).] You can also call 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Hotline.

Talk with a school counselor, victim advocate, or social worker in your town or city. In the US, there are victim advocates in county offices, police stations, domestic violence prevention centers, rape crisis centers, sheriff's offices, Child Advocacy Centers, and offices of state attorneys general. Victim advocates can help you gather evidence, devise a safety plan (figure out how to keep you safe from what's being threatened), and get a civil protection or anti-stalking order against the person threatening you. [You can do a web search for "victim advocate" in your location or, in the US, call the National Organization for Victim Assistance in the Washington, D.C., area—1-800-TRY-NOVA/800-879-6682 or go to tryNOVA.org.]

About ConnectSafely

ConnectSafely is a Silicon Valley, California-based nonprofit organization dedicated to educating users of connected technology about safety, privacy and security. We publish research-based safety tips, parents' guidebooks, advice, news and commentary on all aspects of tech use and policy.