HOW TO KEEP OUR CHILDREN SAFE FROM ONLINE PREDATORS

With the advancement of technology comes an alarming rise of child abuse facilitated by predators on the internet. To keep our children safe, we must be vigilant about these advances, engage in open dialogues with our kids about these threats, and monitor who they are communicating with online.

In the United States, 3.6 million child abuse allegations were filed in 2022. Unfortunately, online predators have become one of the most dangerous threats to our children over the past several years. According to statistics by the FBI, over 500,000 online predators jeopardize the safety of our children daily.

New waves of technology establish a hard truth: child abuse is not solely restricted to physical contact, but also includes noncontact abuse such as exploitation, voyeurism, and child pornography. At the heart of each of these disturbing cases, however, lies a real victim whose life has been irrevocably altered.

Social media, gaming, and online dating sites are rife with opportunities for predators to prey on children. Online grooming has become increasingly popular, where offenders manipulate children by lying about their identity and engaging in rapport building through alleged shared interests, compliments, and even by liking someone’s social media posts. This can lead to an exchange of sexual conversations and explicit images that are further fueled by incentives like gift cards, alcohol, or drugs.
Although it is still difficult to comprehend all the long-term impacts of COVID, we have seen the number of online solicitations increase by 106% in 2020 as reported by the National Center For Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). In 2019, there were 19,174 online enticement reports and almost double the numbers in 2020 with a total of 37,872 reports.

The good news is that in Chester County, since 2019, we have seen a slight decrease by almost 3% in the number of child abuse allegations we received over the past four years. That decrease may be attributed to the pandemic, prevention and education programming, and the increase in the number of child abuse detectives, prosecutors, and other support we have dedicated to address this epidemic in the past few years.

The bad news is our Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force is now triaging a 53% increase in the number of online offenses, also called “cybertips,” we have handled over the same timeframe.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># Child Abuse Reports</th>
<th># ICAC Cybertips</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2042</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
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<td>133</td>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
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<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
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The ICAC Task Force is working diligently to ensure our children’s safety. To attack the surge of internet crimes we expanded the task force in 2021 to 10 investigators including police officers from Phoenixville, Oxford, East Brandywine, West Whiteland, North Coventry, Willistown, and Kennett Square. They have done outstanding work in prevention and education, investigations, and prosecutions.

Investigators and others from our office provide trainings to parents and children to educate them on everything concerning internet crimes against children and internet safety.

One of the key issues our child abuse prevention training addresses is that parents and guardians have a duty to ensure their children’s safety by monitoring
what they are doing online. That means checking their child’s devices, talking about the danger of possible predators, and stressing that they should not share pictures or personal information with anyone.

We know that parents and guardians are mostly unaware of what their children do online. Most don’t want to intrude or violate their children’s privacy. In fact, the reports indicate that only 15% of parents really know what their children are doing online.

Concerningly, statistics from the FBI show that online predators mostly target children between the ages of 12-15. One in 25 children who are solicited by online predators are asked to meet in person—which can lead to a sexual assault.

According to NCMEC, in 2021, there were more than 17,000 reports of child sex trafficking throughout the United States. Predators often seize upon the most vulnerable children in these cases and the trafficking occurs when a child under 18 is advertised, solicited, or exploited through a commercial sex act. This can be the exchange of money, drugs, or something else in exchange for sexual activity.

In Chester County we have investigated recent cases involving “sextortion” where a child shares an explicit image of themself believing it to be sent to a trusted peer/friend, when in fact it was a ruse. Once received the abuser is then able to blackmail, bully, harass, or demand more photos, money, or sexual contact from the victim. The dangerous online predator now possesses that indelible image that can been seen on the internet. Believing that there is no way to emerge from this humiliating encounter victims often become suicidal, depressed, anxious, and hopeless.

All of us in law enforcement and our community partners will continue to fight for justice for all victims of child abuse. Our efforts promote educational safety and protection of children to the fullest extent. With additional resources and quickened response times, the hope is that the number of child abuse cases will decrease exponentially, but we must all work together to attain that goal. That also means talking to your children about these concerns, engaging in open and
honest dialogues about sex, our bodies, safe/unsafe touches, and letting them know that you are there to help and support them, regardless of the situation.

Over the past years, the DAO and Crime Victims' Center of Chester County, Inc. delivered a child abuse prevention training called, “Stewards of Children,” to focus on learning how to prevent child sexual abuse. Since 2018, over 5,777 people were trained in the county. We believe that has made an impact, but we must do more.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month so we are imploring that you do your part, step up, and do whatever it takes to keep our kids safe. Not just this month, but every day.

*Call Childline at 1-800-932-0313 if you suspect a child is being abused.

**The PA Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force (ICAC) provides personnel and funding for investigations related to the exploitation of children on the Internet. ICAC is funded through a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, based in Washington, DC. In Chester County, the ICAC Task Force is comprised of investigators from the Chester County Detectives and local municipalities.

Approved for release by Deborah Ryan, District Attorney