

Stay alert to online grooming:

Online, people aren't always who they say they are



The Internet is an entrancing medium. We are drawn to it like moths to light. It's a key way to stay in touch with family and friends, and meet and make new ones who share our interests. Unfortunately, this also makes the Internet a natural tool for misuse by someone who wants to draw people to them—whether a sexual predator or someone espousing harmful extremist views. Young people with less world experience are more vulnerable to enticement by an attentive person with a seductive or compelling message.

Harnessing this alluring power enables online grooming, a process of emotional manipulation. You may have heard of grooming as the process by which pedophiles lead young people down a path toward online sexual exploitation. But a process similar to grooming is also used by terrorist and extremist recruiters to enlist young people to their causes.

Sexual predators and extremist recruiters alike look for vulnerable young people who are isolated both physically and emotionally, who express loneliness or feelings of not belonging, or who project low self-esteem. Extremist recruiters also look for young people who are searching for ways to give their lives greater meaning and who aspire to make a difference. They look for vulnerable youth who can be brought into their community by appealing to their need for belonging.

The grooming process typically involves an adult befriending a young person and then winning their trust by showering them with constant personal attention—responsive text messages, flattery, sympathy, promises of modeling jobs or a role in supporting a cause, and gifts like money, chocolate, clothing, or religious texts.

The predator tries to sexualize the relationship, seeking to control the young person and continue the abuse, which may include taking photos and videos, if not meeting in person.

Extremist recruiters appeal to the young person's good intentions, and seek to radicalize them, answering questions and arguing, trying to convince the young person to join the cause, typically by either going abroad or fomenting violence where they live. Recruiters can also draw on a vast cache of exceptionally slick and sophisticated media—compelling video, images, and music—to make their point.

Isolating the young person is key to this seduction, which the solitary nature of personal devices reinforces. Extremist recruiters warn young people away from friends and family who "won't understand," raising prejudices and fears of being labeled a terrorist. Sexual predators intimidate and manipulate kids into silence, using "sextortion" and threats of exposure to enforce it.

A significant difference between sexual predators and extremist recruiters is that predators are trying to fill a personal need, and very carefully hide their identities; recruiters passionately believe in the truth of their message and mission and, while they may not initially disclose their ideology in total, they don't completely hide their viewpoints.

What can a parent or teacher do?

Pay attention to kids' digital lives



From the time children are young, get involved in their digital lives. Be curious, not judgmental. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Negotiate clear ground rules for internet use that fit the child's age and level of maturity, and your family's values. Talk about what can and cannot be shared, and agree on limits. Regularly revisit these guidelines as your child matures. Consider using family safety software for monitoring.

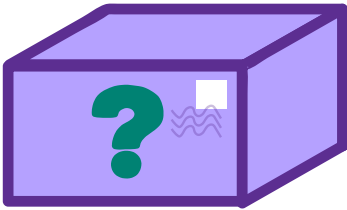
- Periodically, ask young people to show you their online world—sites they visit; pages they create; games they play; what they talk about and share, and with whom. Respect any rare opportunities to peer into their lives online.
- Educate young people about how a phone's camera can use GPS tracking to pinpoint the location of their phone—and them—and help them turn it off.
- For a measure of control over kids' devices, consider gathering them before bedtime for overnight charging in the parent's room.
- Teach kids to trust their instincts, and explain the dangers of risky behavior, including sexting, live-streaming/broadcasting and sharing personal information. Let them know they can come to you if something feels uncomfortable or someone alarms them, and that you'll help. Be clear that you won't take away their phone or curtail other digital privileges for coming forward.

Build resilience



- Support kids' friendships. Strong peer relationships are essential to healthy adolescent development, and young people with robust social networks and a strong social circle at school may be less-likely targets.
- Encourage analytical and critical thinking. Prompt teens to ask serious questions about what they see and who they meet online.
 - How do you know the information you see and hear is accurate? Do you think it is trying to convince you of something? Is there any way you could test its objectivity?
 - What might be the motivation of a person who contacts you? How do you know the person is who they say they are? Are they asking you to keep your friendship a secret? If so, why is that?

Watch for warning signs



- The young person may withdraw, get upset when online or texting, or display a reluctance to go to school.
- Gifts or money arrive in the mail from people you don't know or from another country.
- You find sexually explicit photos, video, or texts on your kid's mobile device.
- You find evidence of visits to certain websites, or the use of encrypted apps (a form of communication popular among extremist recruiters) or live-streaming apps (where a young person can broadcast live video footage of themselves to anyone on the Internet).
- Terrorist or extremist content is found on the young person's device or browser history.
- The young person starts espousing extremist views in conversations about current affairs/refuses to discuss certain elements of current affairs with you.

What to do

In instances of sexual predation, parents and guardians should contact local authorities immediately.

In cases of extremist recruiting, some countries have in place safeguarding referral schemes where concerned caregivers can refer young people to counter-radicalization professionals. In the absence of such a program, contacting local or national authorities, or seeking professional counselling support may be advisable.

What Microsoft is doing

Microsoft has made protecting children, teens, and families online a priority for more than two decades. Our approach is largely four-fold: innovating and investing in technology; implementing robust self-governance within Microsoft; raising awareness and educating customers about online risks; and collaborating with others—for example, working with non-governmental organizations to make available alternative narratives to extremist viewpoints. Online grooming of young people for any purpose is one risk that we work to mitigate and aspire to eliminate. Check out the links below to some new and evolved policy approaches.

[Microsoft releases Digital Civility Index, challenges people to be more empathetic online](#)

[New resources to report hate speech, request content reinstatement](#)

[Microsoft's approach to terrorist content online](#)

[Microsoft partners with Institute for Strategic Dialogue and NGOs to discourage online radicalization to violence](#)

Helpful info

[Violent Extremism: The New Online Safety Discussion](#), The Family Online Safety Institute

[ISIS and the Lonely Young American](#), *New York Times*, 27 June 2015

[Teach kids to identify misinformation and hate speech online](#)

[Protecting "tweens" and teens online](#)

[Let's get real about "sexting"](#)

[Middle East Media Research Institute \(MEMRI\)](#)

[Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#)