

Catholic Mutual CARES for Kids

Behind the Screen: Spotting & Stopping Online Abuse

Children and teens spend a significant amount of time online through social media, gaming platforms, and virtual classrooms. While these tools provide opportunities for learning and connection, they also expose minors to risks such as online grooming, exploitation, and cyberbullying. As educators and parish leaders, you play a critical role in recognizing the warning signs and taking action to keep children safe.

Spotting Online Abuse

Online abuse often begins subtly, making it difficult to detect without careful observation. One of the first indicators may be changes in a child's behavior. A previously outgoing child might become withdrawn, anxious, or irritable after using digital devices. They may start avoiding friends and family or show a sudden decline in school performance and parish activities. Secretive behavior is another red flag—such as hiding screens, quickly closing apps when approached, or insisting on privacy about online interactions.

Digital warning signs can also reveal potential abuse. These include excessive messaging, especially late at night, or interactions with unknown adults online. Children may receive unexplained gifts, money, or game credits, which can indicate grooming. Groomers often use flattery and attention to build trust, asking overly personal questions about family or location and encouraging secrecy. Over time, these conversations may escalate from friendly chats to requests for photos or even in-person meetings. Recognizing these patterns early is essential to prevent harm.

Stopping Abuse Before It Happens

Prevention begins with education and trust. Teach children what safe online behavior looks like, including never sharing personal details or agreeing to meet someone they only know online. Encourage open communication and reassure them that reporting suspicious behavior is always the right choice. Creating an environment where children feel safe to speak up is one of the most effective safeguards.

Implementing strong boundaries is equally important. Establish clear rules for device use in classrooms and parish spaces, and ensure privacy settings are enabled on all platforms. Regularly review the apps, games, and chat services children use, and monitor for unknown contacts. These proactive measures reduce opportunities for predators to reach minors.



If you suspect grooming or exploitation, act immediately. Document all evidence, including screenshots, URLs, and messages, and report the situation to local law enforcement and child protection agencies. Notify parish or school leadership so they can coordinate a response. Avoid confronting the suspected abuser directly, as this can endanger the child or compromise evidence. After reporting, provide ongoing support to the child and their family, including access to counseling resources and regular follow-up. Hosting community workshops for staff and parents regarding online safety can further strengthen your prevention efforts.

Conversation Starters for Teachers and Parents

Starting conversations about online safety can feel challenging, but it is essential for prevention. Having these conversations, early and often, allows the child to feel safe reporting any suspicious behavior. Here are some practical ways to begin:

- *What apps or games do you enjoy the most? Can you show me how they work?*
 - This opens the door for understanding what platforms the child uses and who they interact with.
- *Has anyone ever asked you for personal information online? How did you respond?*
 - This helps gauge their awareness of privacy and gives you a chance to reinforce safe practices.
- *Do you know what to do if someone online makes you feel uncomfortable?*
 - Encourage them to share and remind them that they can always come to you without fear.
- *What would you do if someone you met online wanted to meet in person?*
 - Discuss why this is dangerous and what steps they should take instead.
- *Do you ever feel pressured to share pictures or secrets online?*
 - Normalize talking about these situations and reassure them that saying “no” is always okay.

Protecting children online is not a one-time conversation—it is an ongoing commitment. By staying informed, vigilant, and proactive, you create a safe environment where minors can learn, grow, and thrive without fear of exploitation. Every observation, every conversation, and every report matters. Together, we can make a significant difference in stopping online abuse before it starts.

References

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (n.d.). Home. Retrieved December 15, 2025, from <https://www.missingkids.org/home>

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (n.d.). NetSmartz. Retrieved December 15, 2025, from <https://www.missingkids.org/NetSmartz/home>