

Know! Online Predators On The Rise

It is no surprise that young people are racking up more time on their electronic devices for both work and play due to the pandemic. What you may not know is that the presence of online predators has also increased as well as their chances of gaining access to our children.

Human trafficking is a \$150 billion global industry that experts say is on the rise, especially online. In an interview with a local television station in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, prosecutors Melissa Hoppmeyer and Kathryn Marsh shared that children between the ages of 11 to 14 are being highly recruited by sex traffickers. They say these abusers are master manipulators that seek out both girls and boys they believe to be vulnerable. They are commonly connecting with unsuspecting youth through online gaming and in chatrooms.

The abuser will coerce a child into sharing a risqué photo for example, and then the blackmailing begins. The child is then told to share more sexually explicit content or face the consequences. Out of fear, the young person may send another photo or video to comply, and just like that, they are pulled in even deeper.

Many people find it hard to believe human trafficking is occurring in their "bubble," but the unfortunate reality is that it can and does occur in all types of communities, neighborhoods and homes.

Young people must be told early, and reminded often, that they are not to communicate with strangers online; only with people they know. It may seem like a silly thing to have to say, since we've been telling them not to talk to strangers their whole lives, but there are sites and apps that encourage our children to do just that...talk to strangers. One such site that has blown up in popularity since the pandemic is Omegle.

Omegle is a free online chatting site that promotes itself as, "a great way to meet new friends, even while practicing social distancing." The site says that users must be 18 + years old or 13 + and have parental permission." But there is no age verification or place for acquired parental permission.

The user has many options at this point. They can text or video chat with someone unknown or go into spy mode, where they pose a question and quietly watch as two strangers discuss the answer. The user can also choose an "unmoderated" chat, which says, "by clicking on this button you are more than likely to encounter sexual behavior," or "adult" mode that states "the user will encounter sexual material." At the click of the chosen button, the site picks someone at random for the user to chat with by text or video. Names are not given. The users are referred to as "You" and "Stranger." The site also states that predators are known to use Omegle.

Profanity, pornography, and predators: the danger exists on Omegle and within a multitude of other sites and apps that lure young people in and links them with strangers of all ages. Human traffickers are shrewd and cunning. They know how and where to connect with and hook young people.

Aside from full parental lockdown of the internet, our best line of defense in protecting our children against the dangers that lurk online is being aware of what is out there and talking with our daughters and sons about it; having open, honest conversations on what may feel like a difficult topic. We are not suggesting scare tactics, but we are encouraging you to let them know there are dangerous people with criminal intentions who prey on unsuspecting youth. Children must also know without a doubt that if they do find themselves in an uncomfortable situation, however it is that they got there, that we---as their parents and protectors---will be there to love them and help them through it always.

*To report suspected human trafficking activity and get help, contact the U.S. Department of Homeland Security at **1-866-347-2423** 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year, or submit a tip online at [ice.gov/tips](https://www.ice.dhs.gov/tips).*

Sources

[FOX6 News Milwaukee, Derica Williams: Human trafficking a \\$150B industry; ages 11-14 highly recruited. Jan 2021.](#)

[Parentology, Kristina Cappetta: Omegle – The Dangerous New Chat Site Where Kids Meet Strangers. Oct 2020.](#)

