

When to Worry: Spotting Online Harm

Introduction

In an increasingly digital world, children and teenagers spend a significant portion of their lives online. While the internet offers vast opportunities for learning and connection, it also presents potential dangers such as online grooming, cyberbullying, and exploitation. For parents and caregivers, recognizing the warning signs of online harm is crucial for early intervention and protecting children. This guide provides a comprehensive overview of behavioral, emotional, and digital indicators that may signal a child is at risk or experiencing online harm [1, 2].

Understanding Online Harm: Grooming, Cyberbullying, and Exploitation

It is essential for parents to understand the different forms of online harm their children might encounter. These can range from subtle psychological manipulation to overt abuse [1, 2].

Online Grooming

Online grooming is a deceptive and manipulative process where an individual (the groomer) builds a relationship with a child online with the intention of sexual exploitation. This process is often subtle and can unfold over time, making it difficult to detect [2, 3].

Stages of Grooming [3]:

1. **Targeting:** The groomer identifies a vulnerable child, often someone who is lonely, has low self-esteem, or is seeking attention.
2. **Gaining Trust:** The groomer establishes a rapport with the child, often by showing excessive attention, flattery, or offering gifts.

3. **Filling a Need:** The groomer identifies and exploits a void in the child's life (e.g., lack of parental attention, desire for friendship).
4. **Isolation:** The groomer attempts to isolate the child from their family and friends, making themselves the child's primary confidant.
5. **Sexualization:** The conversations gradually become more sexualized, pushing boundaries and normalizing inappropriate topics.
6. **Meeting:** The groomer attempts to arrange a face-to-face meeting with the child.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying involves using digital technologies to repeatedly harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. It can take many forms and often occurs where children spend a lot of time online, such as social media, gaming platforms, and messaging apps [1].

Forms of Cyberbullying:

- **Harassment:** Sending mean, hurtful, or threatening messages.
- **Denigration:** Spreading rumors or gossip online to damage someone's reputation.
- **Impersonation:** Pretending to be someone else to post embarrassing or damaging content.
- **Outing/Trickery:** Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information online without their consent.
- **Exclusion:** Intentionally leaving someone out of an online group or game.
- **Cyberstalking:** Repeatedly sending messages or threats that cause fear.

Online Exploitation

Online exploitation encompasses a broader range of harms, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM), sextortion, and other forms of abuse facilitated by digital means. This is often the culmination of grooming or other manipulative tactics [1].

Warning Signs: Behavioral, Emotional, and Digital

Indicators

Recognizing changes in a child’s behavior, mood, or digital habits is key to identifying potential online harm. Parents should be vigilant and trust their instincts [1, 2].

Behavioral and Emotional Warning Signs [1, 2]:

Category	Specific Indicators
Secrecy & Withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Becomes secretive about online activities, hides their screen, or quickly closes apps when an adult enters the room.- Refuses to talk about online interactions or who they are communicating with.- Withdraws from family and friends, showing less interest in activities they once enjoyed.- Spends an excessive amount of time online, especially at unusual hours (e.g., late at night).
Emotional Distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Exhibits sudden mood swings, irritability, anxiety, or depression.- Appears sad, angry, or distressed after being online.- Shows changes in eating or sleeping patterns.- Expresses feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, or suicidal thoughts.
Changes in Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Becomes unusually aggressive, defiant, or withdrawn.- Shows a sudden drop in academic performance or loss of interest in school.- Asks to go places without explanation or wants to meet someone but won’t say who or where.- Receives gifts, mail, or packages from someone unknown to the family.- Uses language or phrases that seem too advanced or inappropriate for their age.
Physical Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Experiences unexplained physical injuries.- Complains of headaches, stomachaches, or other stress-related physical ailments.

Digital Warning Signs [1, 2]:

Category	Specific Indicators
Device Usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Has multiple online accounts or profiles that parents are unaware of.- Uses devices in secret or tries to hide their online activity.- Deletes browsing history or messages frequently.- Receives phone calls or messages from unknown numbers or makes calls to unrecognized numbers.- Downloads new apps without permission, especially those designed for anonymity or hiding content (e.g., vault apps).
Online Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Mentions an online “mentor,” “friend,” or “boyfriend/girlfriend” who seems too old for them.- Receives excessive messages or calls from a particular online contact.- Is overly protective of their phone or computer.- Shows an unusual interest in privacy settings or attempts to bypass parental controls.
Content & Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Begins downloading or viewing pornography or other inappropriate content.- Possesses unexplained money or gifts.- Creates or shares sexually suggestive images or videos of themselves.

What to Do If You Spot Warning Signs

If you notice any of these warning signs, it is crucial to act calmly and decisively. Your primary goal is to ensure your child’s safety and well-being [1, 2].

1. **Stay Calm and Listen:** Approach your child with empathy and a non-judgmental attitude. Let them know you are there to help and support them, not to punish them. Listen carefully to what they say and don’t interrupt [2].
2. **Gather Information:** Ask open-ended questions to understand the situation better. If possible, discreetly gather evidence (screenshots, messages) without confronting the child or the perpetrator directly at this stage [1].
3. **Ensure Immediate Safety:** If you believe your child is in immediate danger, contact local law enforcement or emergency services immediately.
4. **Report:** Report online child exploitation to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST or through their CyberTipline. For

cyberbullying, report to the platform where it occurred and consider involving school authorities [1].

5. **Seek Professional Help:** Connect with a therapist or counselor specializing in child trauma or online safety. They can provide support for your child and guidance for your family [2].
6. **Review and Adjust Safety Measures:** Re-evaluate your family's online safety rules and parental control settings. Strengthen them as needed and reinforce open communication [1].

Conclusion

Protecting children from online harm is an ongoing responsibility that requires vigilance, education, and proactive measures. By understanding the risks, recognizing the warning signs, and knowing how to respond effectively, parents and caregivers can create a safer digital environment for their children, empowering them to navigate the online world with confidence and resilience.

References

- [1] Internet Safety 101. (n.d.). Warning Signs - Online Child Exploitation/Abuse. <https://internetsafety101.org/online-predators/warning-signs/> [2] National Children's Alliance. (2025, August 19). The Real Red Flags of Grooming. <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/the-real-red-flags-of-grooming/> [3] SafeWise. (2026, February 2). Dangerous Apps for Kids: What Parents Need to Know in 2026. <https://www.safewise.com/dangerous-apps-for-kids/>