



Back-to-School Online Safety

A practical guide for parents, caregivers, teachers and school leaders

SAY THIS FIRST

“You are not in trouble. I believe you. We are going to handle this together.”

SIGNS WORTH NOTICING

- A sharp mood change after messages or notifications; panic, anger, shame or tearfulness around a device.
- Sudden secrecy, screen-hiding, deleted or newly created accounts, or a major increase or decrease in device use.
- Withdrawal from friends, sports or school; sleep loss, declining performance, headaches or reluctance to attend class.
- Unexplained requests for money, gift cards or cryptocurrency; repeated payment alerts or urgent attempts to borrow money.
- A new online relationship involving secrecy, gifts, flattery, sexual questions, age uncertainty or pressure to move to a private app.
- Rumors about images, impersonation accounts, AI-generated sexual content or peers repeatedly asking to see or forward something.

KNOW THE PATTERN

PATTERN	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
Cyberbullying	repeated harassment, rumors, threats, exclusion, impersonation or sharing private information online.
Grooming	trust-building followed by secrecy, isolation, boundary testing, sexualization or requests for images or meetings.
Sextortion	threats to release real, stolen or fabricated sexual content unless the child sends money or more content.
Nudification	AI-generated fake nude or sexual images made from ordinary photos. The image may be fake; the harm is real.

How grooming escalates



The first 10 minutes

- 1 **Stay calm and believe the child.** Lead with support, not blame. Tell them they are not in trouble and that asking for help was the right thing to do.
- 2 **Check immediate safety.** Ask whether anyone is threatening physical harm, knows the child's location, plans to meet them, or whether the child is thinking about self-harm. Call 911 for imminent danger; call or text 988 for a mental health crisis.
- 3 **Stop the leverage.** Do not pay, send more content, negotiate or meet. After preserving identifying information, stop engaging and follow law-enforcement guidance before blocking.
- 4 **Preserve evidence without spreading it.** Record usernames, profile links, phone numbers, dates, messages, threats and payment requests. Capture text and account details when safe, but do not ask anyone to resend, forward, print, email or download a minor's explicit image.
- 5 **Report and support.** Report sexual exploitation to the CyberTipline and local law enforcement or the FBI. Report the account and content to the platform. If peers or school systems are involved, notify the school's designated safeguarding leader and follow applicable reporting law and policy.

WARNING

Immediate danger: Call 911. Mental health crisis or suicidal thoughts: call or text 988. Do not leave the child alone when immediate safety is in question.

Respond, Report, Rebuild Safety

Use the role-specific checklist below, then keep supporting the child after the immediate incident is reported.

FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

- Keep your voice and body language calm. Avoid blame, interrogation or promises you cannot keep.
- Do not make loss of the phone the automatic first consequence. Fear of punishment can keep a child trapped and silent.
- Review account privacy, location sharing, follower lists and connected devices together after urgent evidence is preserved.
- Schedule brief follow-ups. Ask about sleep, school, retaliation, peer rumors and whether new accounts are contacting them.
- Offer a counselor or victim advocate. Shame and fear can continue after the messages stop.

FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

- Move the student to a private, safe setting and listen without conducting your own detailed investigation.
- Use the child's words in your factual notes. Record date, time, platform, account identifiers, witnesses and actions taken.
- Do not display, copy, print, email or forward explicit imagery. Do not ask a student to send it to you or another staff member.
- Notify the designated safeguarding/administrative lead and follow mandatory-reporting law and district policy. Do not assume a peer-created or AI image is only a discipline issue.
- Protect confidentiality, prevent retaliation and coordinate academic or schedule supports. Continue checking on the targeted student.

WHERE TO REPORT AND GET HELP

SITUATION	RESOURCE	HOW TO REACH IT
Child Sexual Exploitation	CyberTipline	report.cybertip.org 1-800-THE-LOST
Law Enforcement	FBI / local law enforcement	tips.fbi.gov 1-800-CALL-FBI
Content Removal	Take It Down	takeitdown.ncmec.org
Mental Health Crisis	988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988 988lifeline.org

REDUCE RISK BEFORE AN INCIDENT

- Make online safety a series of short conversations, not one annual lecture.
- Teach that moving a new contact to another app, secrecy, gifts and rapid sexual questions are red flags.
- Set the norm: do not like, comment on, request or forward humiliating or sexual content. Tell an adult.

BUILD A RELIABLE WAY BACK TO HELP

- Review privacy, location and messaging settings with the child, not only for the child.
- Create a device-free sleeping location and a family/school plan for late-night threats.
- Say the response promise often: "My first move will be to help."



Read the full article

This tip sheet accompanies Guardify's complete back-to-school online safety guide.

[Guardify.com/back-to-school-online-safety-guide/](https://guardify.com/back-to-school-online-safety-guide/)

Sources: NCMEC 2025 CyberTipline Report; FBI Sextortion guidance; NCMEC Online Enticement and AI & Child Safety guidance; CDC 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey analysis; StopBullying.gov. Educational guidance only. Mandatory-reporting duties and school procedures vary by jurisdiction; follow applicable law and policy.