

# PARENTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Parental guidance for the online protection  
of children from sexual exploitation  
and sexual abuse



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## **Acknowledgements**

The text for this brochure was prepared by **Dr Elizabeth Milovidov, JD**. Dr Milovidov is an e-safety consultant with more than 20 years of experience as an attorney law professor and child rights advocate. Her mission is to empower parents and children on Internet, technology and social media issues and she is the founder of DigitalParentingCoach.com.

Her video tutorials accompanying this brochure can be found on [www.coe.int/children](http://www.coe.int/children) or via the Council of Europe YouTube channel under the Children's rights playlist.

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**Text prepared by Dr Elizabeth Milovidov, JD.**

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## INTRODUCTION

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**W**ith the spread of Internet, mobile phones and wi-fi connected devices, children and young people are able to access platforms and content at almost any time of day or night and from almost any location provided that they are connected.

■ The majority of the time, this Internet connectivity presents positive opportunities and benefits as children use Internet to do their homework, chat with friends, network socially, share photos, make music videos, upload videos, play games, visit chat rooms, use file sharing sites and much more.

■ But we also know that children encounter online risks. These can, for instance, be of a sexual nature, such as seeing sexual images, receiving sexual messages, being exposed to pornography, being targeted for sexual exploitation and abuse, and more.

■ States have a crucial role to play in ensuring child protection online as well as offline, and in guiding parents and carers to available resources and best practices in safely navigating digital environment.

■ The aim of this handbook is to brief parents and child carers on five current online risks of a sexual nature and to provide resources and best practices for parents and carers to prevent the sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children.



Sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children can have serious and often detrimental consequences on children for their entire life. States need to ensure that parents, educators and decision-makers do not shy away from the problem, but bring it to light and discuss ways to solve the issues.

■ This handbook is divided into six sections

- ▶ Online protection of children
- ▶ Online sexual exploitation of children (Sextortion)
- ▶ Self-generated sexually explicit images and materials involving children (Sexting)
- ▶ Sex-chatting
- ▶ Grooming
- ▶ Sexualised images used in revenge (Revenge Porn)

■ The Council of Europe has prepared videos on each of these themes, which can be found on [www.coe.int/children](http://www.coe.int/children).





# 1. ONLINE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

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**P**arents and carers face new challenges and issues on a regular basis as children and young people become more adept at using the Internet, technology and social media.



## Digital parenting is:

- ▶ open communication with your child;
- ▶ regular involvement in your child's Internet activities;
- ▶ active protection of your child's digital reputation and digital identity;
- ▶ learning with your child the opportunities that the Internet can present;
- ▶ protecting your child from the dangers that the Internet may pose;
- ▶ bringing your parenting skills to the online world.

■ Children and young people use smartphones, tablets, gaming consoles, digital cameras and other smart devices – and often without parental supervision or parental guidance. Whatever the age of the child, Internet challenges are present.

■ Children aged under 8 may not be online as actively as older children, however parents must still be vigilant regarding screen balance and appropriate websites and games.



### **Digital parenting quick tips - Children aged under 8**

- ▶ Sit with your child when they are online so that you learn and discuss together.
- ▶ Keep the computer up-to-date with the latest firewall, antivirus, antispyware software.
- ▶ If you opt for parental controls and filters, maximize the features.
- ▶ Ensure that privacy settings are at maximum levels on all devices that your child uses.

■ Children aged 9-12 are adventuring online and parental guidance is most welcome at this age and parents can get a head start on ensuring that their children use Internet and technology safely and responsibly by continued conversations.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – Children aged 9-12**

- ▶ Don't forbid your child to go online because they will go, in any case, and you will not be informed which brings more risks.
- ▶ Discuss with your child what they do online, what websites they visit, who they speak with and when they go online.
- ▶ Teach them to safeguard their privacy online and to never share personally identifiable information.

- ▶ Show them how to block and report people.
- ▶ Build trust and confidence so that your child will come to you if something does happen.

■ Children aged 13-17 may face more online issues as they use the Internet more and encounter more risk, but again here parental guidance and support can be very effective in online child protection.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – Children aged 13-17**

- ▶ Encourage your teenager to talk to you about any problems offline and online.
- ▶ Create a family media use agreement with your teenager to encourage proper balance and use of technology. In the agreement, list out your expectations on the use of technology.
- ▶ Be aware of how your teenager interacts with technology – are they agitated, grumpy, angry, or secretive? Be prepared to intervene with support. If you see any changes in behaviour, speak with your teenager and eventually seek support from other parents, the school or health professionals.

■ Unfortunately, there is no one quick fix for parenting a child in the digital environment, but the research has demonstrated that children who are resilient may be better able to handle the risks that online connectivity can present.

■ The challenge for parents, educators and decision-makers today is to identify and maintain good practices in online child protection and digital parenting.

■ There are helplines and hotlines in many European countries where parents can call-in to ask questions, look at the websites to stay current of issues, or download parent guides for further reading. In general a hotline is staffed by counsellors who are available to speak to parents, teachers, students, and children – anyone with an online issue.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – Helplines and hotlines**

- ▶ There are many national helplines and hotlines listed on the Better Internet for Kids website, developed by European Schoolnet or on the INHOPE website.
- ▶ If your country is not listed, you may wish to perform an online search using terms such as “online safety” or “Internet safety” in your local language.
- ▶ You may also want to inquire with your Internet Service Provider (ISP) about support services in your community and also those provided by your ISP.



## 2. ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN (SEXTORTION)

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**T**he term “sextortion” is very debated in the field of child protection, because the term does not clearly indicate that this is sexual exploitation. The term used by the Council of Europe and other agencies is sexual coercion and extortion.



Sexual coercion and extortion: An offender will blackmail a child with the help of self-generated images of that child in order to extort sexual favours, money, or other benefits from the child. The offender will threaten to post the images on social media or to send them to that child’s family and friends.



### **Victims as young as seven years old are being targeted online and offenders have two main motivations when targeting a child:**

- ▶ an economic interest where the offender wants to make money from the extortion, or
- ▶ a sexual interest in children where the offender wants to procure sexual material (photos and/or videos of the child) or even further: the offender wants to initiate an encounter offline.

Europol report, "Online Sexual Coercion and Extortion is a Crime". The report is currently only available in English, however the campaign video is available in several languages.

■ This online coercion and extortion of children is often referred to as "webcam blackmailing" and data indicates that this digital blackmail of children has increased rapidly in the past few years, however it remains largely under-reported due to embarrassment or lack of awareness by these young victims.

■ If someone threatens your child with sharing sexual photos or videos of your child unless your child sends them more or pays them money: don't pay and don't feel embarrassed to report it to the police.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – What to do if your child is the victim of sexual coercion and extortion**

- ▶ Do not share more. Do not pay anything.
- ▶ Look for help. You are not alone.
- ▶ Preserve evidence. Take screenshots. Do not delete anything.
- ▶ Stop the communication. Block the person.
- ▶ Report it to your local police.



### 3. SELF-GENERATED SEXUALLY EXPLICIT IMAGES AND MATERIALS INVOLVING CHILDREN (SEXTING)

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Children and young people have always had to deal with issues such as making friends, maintaining friendships, and dealing with first romantic relationships. However the addition of Internet, technology and social media has transformed simple coming of age issues into overwhelming challenges as children and young people send and share images and messages of a sexual nature.



Sexting is the sending and receiving of sexually explicit messages, (words, photos, videos, images, etc.) usually via cellphone, tablets, laptops or any device that allows the sharing of media and messages.



Surveys and reports across Europe have demonstrated that children are sending and receiving sexual images and that children are becoming more daring and explicit, and often more complicit in terms of self-generated sexually explicit images.

■ Young people may believe that sexting is a harmless activity or that it is no big deal because everyone is doing it, but the reality is grim: the taking, sharing or receiving images can affect a child's self-esteem, cause emotional distress and be very upsetting.

■ Sexting is a challenge for parents and child protection experts because on one hand there is content that is created within the context of a relationship between consenting teenagers and on the other hand there is content featuring younger children.

■ For either situation, once a child posts or sends an image of themselves, they lose control of it forever. The child may then be susceptible to blackmail, bullying, sexual coercion and extortion, grooming or other manipulation.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – How to behave with your child to limit risks**

- ▶ Explain your rules and expectations if you provide your child with a mobile, tablet or smartphone. Explain how the responsible use of this technology to your child.
- ▶ Agree on what is acceptable to post and send.
- ▶ For older children, you may want to use real-life examples from the news illustrating the risks, dangers and legal issues of sexting.
- ▶ If you want your child to trust you and share with you the things that make them uncomfortable or scared, or even mistakes that they have made, you have to be willing to listen and support them.
- ▶ If you learn that your child has been sexting, use this event as an opportunity to talk about sex, share your views and values and help your child to make good decisions in the future.





## 4. SEX-CHATTING

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Sex-chatting is the sharing of sexual images or materials between a child and an adult. Sex-chatting can also constitute the first step towards child grooming or/and to the creation of child pornography and/or sexual coercion.



Studies show that offenders now choose their victims very quickly as online chat becomes immediately sexualised. Research, such as that from the European Online Grooming Project, shows that online paedophiles are having highly sexualised conversations with children in chat rooms within two minutes. Offenders are using social networking sites, gaming platforms and basically any forum where children are gathered and chatting online.

■ This type of sexual exploitation begins through simple chatting and children may be persuaded to send images, take part in sexual activities via a webcam or have sexual conversations by text or online.

Once the offender has begun, they will do anything to keep the child under their control and they may threaten to send the materials to the child's friends and family unless the child continues to do what the offender asks.



### **Sex-chatting quick facts**

- ▶ Young people have a stereotypical view of online sex-chat offenders and think of them as old, overweight men.
- ▶ Online sex-chat offenders may be of any age.
- ▶ Online sex-chat offenders may alter their identity in order to gain the child's trust.
- ▶ Online sex-chat offenders sexualise the relationship with the child.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – How to behave with your child to limit risks**

- ▶ Make sure that your children do not add strangers as 'friends' on social networking sites and do not share personally identifiable information.
- ▶ Notice how your child interacts with technology: does their behaviour change when you enter the room? Do they switch screens or turn off the computer quickly?
- ▶ Maintain the highest privacy settings on all devices and platforms. Check those settings regularly as they may sometimes reset when platforms perform updates or change terms of service.
- ▶ Teach your children to really think before they post or share information. Critical thinking is crucial when dealing with new technology, Internet and social media. Rather than automatically share and click, children and young people need to pause and reflect.
- ▶ Make sure that your child knows that they can always come and talk to you about anything that happens.



## 5. GROOMING

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**M**any predators are now online because it is easy to find child victims in cyberspace and this section is dedicated to the sexual exploitation and abuse of children via social media, chat rooms, gaming environments and other online platforms.



Child sexual abuse offenders form relationships with children by the solicitation of children for sexual purposes through information and communication technologies by establishing an emotional connection to gain their trust.



Online sex offenders will hide their true intentions and may spend a lot of time to gain a child's trust, although as we have seen in research such as that by the European Online Grooming Project, online grooming is usually much faster.

Offenders often pretend to be of the same age range as the child, and they will use chat rooms or online gaming environments that are focused on the interests of children and young people. They may play the role of a supportive friend, or buy gifts or use flattery to try to isolate their victim.

Grooming offenders may try to sexually exploit their young victims by persuading them to take part in online sexual activity. They may ask them to engage in sexualised conversations or ask the children to send pictures or videos of themselves.

Eventually, grooming offenders may ask a child to meet with them in the real world and the child could be subject to sexual violence or trafficking.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – How to behave with your child to limit risks**

- ▶ S – SAFE; keep safe by being careful not to give out personal information.
- ▶ M – MEETING someone you have only been in touch with online can be dangerous.
- ▶ A – ACCEPTING emails, IM or instant messages or opening files from people you don't know or trust can be dangerous.
- ▶ R – RELIABLE; someone online may be lying about who they are.
- ▶ T – TELL your parent, carer or a trusted adult if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried.

SMART rules, Childnet

As with sexting, parents should be aware of how their child is interacting with technology: are they being secretive about who they are talking to, are they switching screens? Are they using sexual language that you wouldn't expect them to know? Do they have new gifts and gadgets that you did not get them?

For older children, parents should also make sure that their child is well-informed that groomers can use social media sites, instant messaging apps including teen dating apps, or online gaming platforms.



## 6. SEXUALISED IMAGES USED IN REVENGE (REVENGE PORN)

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**S**ocial media allows people to create and share information, ideas, photos and other forms of expression, however social media and Internet technologies may also be used to sexually harass or blackmail others.



Non-consensual disclosure of sexual images, or informally “revenge porn,” defines self-generated images and materials (usually intimate or sexually explicit) that are shared within the context of a relationship. The images are then shared with others once the relationship has ended.



Germany, France, Malta and the United Kingdom, for example, have all created laws penalizing those who share images and materials without the consent of the individual involved. The United Kingdom created the first Revenge Porn Helpline, which provides free legal advice on how to have pictures removed from the Internet.



**Digital parenting quick tips – What should you do if your child receives a sexual image of another child?**

- ▶ Tell your child not to share the image. Do not share it online or offline.
- ▶ Ask Google or Microsoft to remove links to revenge porn.



**Digital parenting quick tips – What should you do if your child has created sexually explicit images or videos of themselves and learns that the materials are being shared online?**

- ▶ Don't blame your child for having taken such image and support your child in this stressful and embarrassing situation. Remember that they may feel betrayed.
- ▶ Preserve the evidence by taking screenshots of the online content and try to include the website address.
- ▶ Report the content to the social media platforms and to law enforcement officials.



### **Digital parenting quick tips – What can you tell your child so that they avoid becoming a victim of revenge porn?**

- ▶ Tell your child to never take pictures or videos of a sexually explicit nature for a boyfriend, girlfriend – or anyone.
- ▶ If a boyfriend or girlfriend takes a picture of your child, your child should ask the person to delete it immediately. Tell your child to make sure that they can see that it was deleted.

■ As with all issues of sexual exploitation and abuse online, it is crucial for parents and carers to start those conversations in a non-confrontational way.











Parenting in the 21st century is challenging at the best of times. Today's children grow up in the fast-changing digital age, a new world in which parents may be poorly equipped or are barely keeping up.

This brochure, which may be read in conjunction with six accompanying short video tutorials ([www.coe.int/children](http://www.coe.int/children)), aims to provide parents and carers with useful tools and helpful tips on protecting children online.

In these tutorials, digital parenting coach Dr Elizabeth Milovidov, J.D. gives straightforward practical advice on the particularly sensitive topic of the online protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, explaining terminology and providing sound guidance on what parents need to look out for and how to manage and avoid pitfalls. The six topics addressed in these tutorials are: the online protection of children; sextortion; sexting; sex-chatting; grooming and revenge porn.

[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

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