



Our Partnership With Children's Advocacy Centers

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AS YOUNG CHILDREN, we were taught to avoid strangers, wear helmets, and look both ways before crossing the road. These safety precautions were practiced with parental supervision in early years, and we gained incremental independence as we demonstrated the ability and maturity to follow these guidelines on our own. These safety measures were taught to us by our parents and to our parents by theirs.

Today, with the increasing presence of evolving technology, our own children are facing new dangers, but often with far less guidance and oversight. This must change. Our children cannot navigate this uncharted territory on their own. They deserve protection, and that starts with us.

According to the National Children's Alliance, one in five children is sexually solicited while on the internet, with 35 percent of those victims under the age of 11. Within the walls of their own homes, children's physical safety is at risk as predators use social media, video chat, and even Artificial Intelligence to virtually meet and exploit children. Human trafficking, blackmail for sexual favors, production and distribution of child pornography, and stalking are a few of the ways predators exploit children online.

And it is happening here in Mississippi. In 2023 alone, the Office of the Attorney General's Cyber Crime Division received nearly 5,000 CyberTips from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). That is a 150 percent increase over 2020.

The fact is many of these threats are preventable. With active and ongoing involvement from the loving and trusted adults in our children's lives – parents, relatives, teachers, we can turn these numbers around. Awareness is key to prevention. The more parents know about the technology their children are using, the more they will be able to relate to their children and the better qualified they will be to make informed decisions.

Communication is the first step to prevention. It starts with exploring the internet as a family, including the privacy settings and reporting functionalities. Children need to be taught what content is appropriate to post and share and reminded to never meet with an individual in person, even if they believe the person on the other end of the screen is a peer.

Requiring devices be stored in common areas, creating no phone zones in private spaces such as bathrooms and bedrooms, setting parental passwords for the purchase and download of new apps, and establishing technology curfews and screen time limits are effective ways to increase transparency and accountability.

Some fear monitoring a child's online activity is a violation of privacy. It is not. Asking children what apps they use, obtaining access to usernames and passwords, and regularly monitoring their online profiles, posts, and browsing history is a critical component to protecting them. These are responsible choices for a loving parent to make.

Even with boundaries in place, mistakes and incidents can occur. Parents should talk to children about the risks and roleplay what to do in the event they find themselves in danger. We may not be able to protect children from every threat, but we can teach them how to make responsible choices when they encounter a problem, such as notifying a parent, teacher or trusted adult if someone asks to engage in sexually explicit activity online.

IN AN EFFORT TO HELP families safely navigate the internet, my office has created internet safety guides for both parents and children. And our Be Aware Before You Share campaign makes it easy to remind all of our own online friends that we all have a role to play in making the internet safer for children. This Child Abuse Awareness Month, I urge all Mississippians to familiarize themselves with these online resources and share them with family and friends. Together, let us advocate for our children and our neighbor's children.

As Attorney General, Lynn Fitch leads the 80 affiliate law enforcement agencies that are part of the State's Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force. Her office trains, investigates, and prosecutes child predators in Mississippi. If you have information about a child being sexually exploited online, please report it to 1-800-843-5678. The hotline is manned 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by NCMEC and tips are reported to the Attorney General's Office. You can also make a report online at www.cybertipline.org. The resources mentioned in this article can be found at www.AttorneyGeneralLynnFitch.com.