

Children as young as 11 being targeted by sexual predators online



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Avon and Somerset Police are renewing their call to parents to be aware of their children's online activity, following a recent increase in reports of young children falling victim to sexual predators who target them online.

Recent incidents in Avon and Somerset have included:

- An 11-year old contacted via Instagram and asked to send naked photos of themselves
- A 14-year old contacted via Snapchat and threatened with violence. The offender said they knew where they lived and went to school as their snap maps were open. They said they would find them if they didn't send images
- An 11-year old contacted via Roblox and threatened that their family would be harmed if they didn't send sexual videos
- A 14-year old who believed that they were 'in a relationship' with a 19-year-old over Instagram. The '19-year-old' was in fact an older person who had convinced the child that they were in love.
- Two 12-year-olds targeted via Snap Chat, by a predator posing as a class mate, who coerced and threatened them into supplying sexual pictures
- A general rise in 4 and 15-year-olds sending images to strangers who contacted them via a range of apps, but often through Instagram

Detective Chief Inspector Larisa Hunt, lead for Avon and Somerset Police's internet child abuse and child exploitation team Operation Topaz said: "With the second national lockdown upon us and so much of our lives being moved online, it is more important than ever that we support children to use the internet safely.

“Over recent years, we have seen a continued increase in online child abuse and exploitation and our fear that this would increase during the pandemic, does unfortunately look to be playing out.

“Our focus in Avon and Somerset is engaging with and supporting child victims of abuse and their families, as well as disrupting offenders.

“We need parents to help too. The recent reports of younger children being targeted should be a wakeup call to all those parents who think their kids are only playing with their friends online. Are they? Do you know this for sure? Are they in the room with you whilst they are online?”

“I know this might feel like yet another thing you have to do and that parents are already juggling many tasks. And whilst it’s tempting to let your children disappear off to their bedrooms on their screens, I would urge that you please talk to your children about online safety. Know who they are engaging with online and make sure your children understand that people may not always be who they seem to be.

“There’s also never been a better time to review your parental controls on all of your household devices.”

DCI Hunt adds: “We don’t want to alarm parents unduly. The online world is coming into its own at the moment, helping us to keep up with work, school, friends and family. There is no need to lock away your children’s screens or to scare them with stories about bad people.

“Take a look at the websites and resources available and keep the lines of communication open with your children. There is loads of advice and support for parents and young people out there.”

Advice about apps, games and settings

Child Sexual and Criminal Exploitation Prevention Officer and Co-ordinator Androulla (Andri) Nicolaou said: “My work with children in schools and other settings is a real eye opener – I get to hear about apps and platforms they are using online which I otherwise wouldn’t know about.”

“Requests for photos and images is a topic that comes up more and more in my conversations with young people. They often do not see the harm in sending pictures of themselves – there is definitely a need for more education around how dangerous this can be.”

Apps parents may want to research:

- **Only Fans** – lures young people in with the promise of making money in exchange for photos and videos. Users are supposed to be 18 or over, but age is rarely checked. Things can easily spiral for a young person who is promised an allowance of £££s each week in exchange for sexual photographs.
- **Among Us** – popular with primary school aged children, rated PEGI7. If settings are public, children can chat with people they don’t know whilst playing online. Whilst filters may block some bad language, there are words that don’t get picked up by the filter, meaning children can still be exposed to inappropriate content whilst playing a seemingly age appropriate game.

- **Omegle – Talk to strangers!** *The Internet is full of cool people; Omegle lets you meet them. When you use Omegle, we pick someone else at random so you can have a one-on-one chat. Pretty self-explanatory why this is so inappropriate and dangerous for children to use!*
- **Tinder** – parents may be surprised by this thinking it is a dating app for adults, but we have come across children in years 5 and 6 at primary schools who are mentioning this app in their discussions and who have an account on the site.

Top tips for keeping children safe online:

- Children should have access online to age appropriate apps / content and appropriate parental controls and supervision should be applied
- **Zip it** – Keep your personal stuff private and think about what you say and do online
- **Block it** – Block people who send nasty messages and don't open unknown links and attachments
- **Flag it** – Flag up with someone you trust if anything upsets you, makes you feel uncomfortable or if someone asks to meet you offline

Cyber Protect Officer Kristian Evans's top recommendations of websites and resources for support around online safety:

- **Common Sense Media** – this is a review site for parents by parents, to learn more about apps / movies / TV / games etc and also has reviews from young people
- **Internet Matters** – for guides on how to enable and set up privacy settings for apps/games
- National Crime Agency's **Think You Know** campaign has some great resources that parents can use as part of home schooling their children
- <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/> – online safety tips for children
- <https://www.childnet.com/> – dedicated to making the internet a safe place for children

Offenders

It is highly likely that child abuse offenders are spending more time online due to the lockdown, in greater numbers, and research carried out by **The Lucy Faithfull Foundation** and the Research, Information and Communications Unit suggests that offenders are more likely to relapse during this period.

On the subject of offenders, DCI Hunt has this message: "There are many motivations for some people to look at indecent images of children online or to have sexual communication or contact with children online. For some who manage this with distractions such as work, family and friends, lockdown could be a really difficult time.

"If you are struggling to manage to control this or if you have noticed someone in your family become increasingly secretive about their internet use and are worried that they're looking at sexual images of under 18s you can seek advice from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. You can call their confidential helpline on 0808 1000 900 or visit their website at

<https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/>"