

UDC 37.018.43:004.9]:351

Amanda Mahn,

Seton Hall University

## Behind the “Screens” of Remote Learning

**Abstract:** This paper addresses the phenomenon child grooming on the internet. The author examines ways the pandemic and the new world of remote learning has only made child grooming more prevalent. Ways in which child grooming are present and recommendation to keep our students and children safe are explored.

2020 has been a year none of us could have predicted. From the pandemic, to the infamous *Tiger King* documentary to remote learner, no one could have prepared themselves for this and we are already starting to see some of the detrimental effects this year has had on society. As a senior in college at Seton Hall University, majoring in Elementary Special Education, I have seen the impacts this pandemic has had on college and elementary school students. From completing my own course work to teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> grade lessons for my senior year field internship, I have come to know the ins and outs of remote learning pretty well. Or at least I thought. I recently had the opportunity to attend the virtual event, “Child Grooming and Internet Safety: A Virtual Conversation” hosted by the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking (NJCAHT) from South Jersey. As a 21-year-old woman on social media, I understand the dangers of technology and how easy it is for someone to pretend they are someone they are not in order to get access to you. However, this presentation opened my eyes to how the world of remote learning has brought online grooming to a more dangerous level. In fact, the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking reported “as children in New Jersey stayed home during the pandemic and spent more time on devices, online exploitation by predators increased by over 200%.” As a future educator and hopefully mother when I one day start a family, I found this presentation to be alarming, but because of that, even more important to share and relay this information to teachers, parents and others. In this article I will be sharing the risks of the internet for children as young as elementary school, the warning signs, preventions and why it is never too early to start teaching internet safety as the welfare of children is at stake.

Especially in 2020 where remote learning is prevalent, children are on screens more than ever. NJCAHT shared studies that have shown that “during Covid-19 for the period of March 1, thru May 23, 2020 the NJ Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force received 2380 reports from the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children, up from 760 reports in 2019 during the same time period.” A lot of this has to do with the increase in screen time. Lieutenant John Pizzuro of the New Jersey State Police Digital Technology Investigations Unit explains the impact of the worldwide pandemic, COVID-19 has had on children’s screen time. Lt. Pizzuro shares that, “The new normal has become distance learning and other forms of virtual communication. This is the virtual playground where children reside and it has given predators the ability to be on the same playground with those children without parents knowing.” Children being home with no structure and no ability to go out and do the things they would normally do, screen time for children has risen dramatically. Lt. Pizzuro also shared that “because of the absence of human connection, kids and people are more reliant on technology to be connected. With no social interactions to turn to, children turn to the internet to fill this void. This

feeling of loneliness people are feeling during these unprecedented times, make them even that more vulnerable to child grooming.

With this information, the NJCAHT is encouraging parents and teachers more than ever to pay attention to their children's online lives. Technology create access to young children and teens in ways that were not possible before. Whether it be chat lines, social media, or even children games, such as Roblox, these are spaces that kids think they are safe, but in reality, they are being taken advantage of. This virtual event brought up the dangers of catfishing that technology brings. For instance, for "kid-friendly" apps such as Roblox, where kids think they are talking to children their age, in reality, could be talking to a man in his later 60s. People that want access to children, can hide behind a screen and make up an identity that make their victims feel safe. Once these predators do make their victims feel safe, this is when the sexual grooming can take place. NJCAHT states that "Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) - a term now used instead of "child pornography" - is often initially shared online by a victimized child that has been tricked or manipulated." They want to become your "friend" in order to gain access to you and gain your trust. For instance, Lt. Pizzuro explained the case of Samuel Schwinger, a 34-year-old man in Lakewood, New Jersey, who was arrested on charges of attempting to groom 67 victims via the internet. Schwinger manipulated his victims by obtaining a sexually explicit video of a nine-year-old, pretending he was that nine-year-old to children between the young ages of 6 and 13. As Lt. Pizzuro explained it, what Schwinger did was an example of "social proof." By sending these easily manipulated children these videos of someone their age, it peer pressured them into thinking that it was not only okay if they did it, but that they *should* do it.

These predators are smart and know how to choose their victims, which is why we have to be ahead of the game and understand their strategies. The virtual events I attended had many guests to share their take and experience with child grooming, including a child therapist. The therapist shared that that many of the clients she says that have experienced online grooming and catfishing, they were in these positions because they were lonely. These young clients she has had were looking for friends, and when they were unable to make friends in-person, they turned to the internet. Predators search for these type of victims, often ones with a small following on social media, and provide them the attention they are seeking that they are not receiving in real life. These children are already vulnerable and when someone online is showing them attention and posing to be their friend, they are going to be easily manipulated and easily give away information and participate in illegal acts in order to keep this "friendship." Lt. Pizzuro clarified that "75% of kids are willing to share personal info online about themselves and their family in exchange for goods and services." Hence, teachers and parents should check in with their children's mental health periodically. Humans thrive off social connection and if children are not receiving that connection at school or at home, they are more than likely to turn to the internet, which gives them that quick attention they are craving.

One of the unsettling realities of today is that many times child grooming goes unnoticed by teachers and parents. Lt. Pizzuro shared that "75% of youth who received an online sexual solicitation did not tell a parent." A significant reason is because students are shamed by their manipulator to not tell anyone they know about their relationship. NJCAHT contends that "shame is frequently a method predators and traffickers use to further coerce children into more acts of exploitation, including forcing them to become victims of child sex trafficking." That's why, it is that more imperative for parents and teachers to reduce shame in conversations with children. Maintaining an open line of communication and support with your child can make the world of a difference. The predator wants to be the child's perfect friend and will spend all their time making sure they are. This is why it is

vital for parents to pay extra attention to the amount of time they spend with other adults, as well as monitoring their online activity, can help protect your child from online sexual predators. When your child has healthy relationships in their life and don't feel like they will be judged for information they share with you, they will be less likely to turn to the internet for connections.

On the same topic of having an open line with your children, in these discussions, it is also important for parents and teachers to discuss the dangers of the internet, also known as the "dark web." I had the pleasure of being able to meet over the phone with Danny Papa, Jefferson Township K-12 Supervisor of Social Studies and President of the Board of Trustees and Co-Chair for the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking. Papa was more than willing to meet with me and was happy to hear that I had interest in learning more about this disturbing reality because he shared with me that "The biggest obstacle is empathy. It is empathy that changes reality." Additionally, Papa was thrilled to hear that I was an education major with the goal of becoming an elementary school teacher after I graduate this following May because teachers have the power to educate students on the dangers of the internet. He shared with me that if you are only starting to teach children about internet safety in middle school, it was too late. This was a disturbing fact and after he said that, I realized how true it was. I am in a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade placement in a suburban town in New Jersey for my senior year clinical practice. The 2<sup>nd</sup> graders in my class are aware of TikTok, YouTube, Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite, etc. According to Statista, 10-19 year olds accounted for 32.5% of TikTok's active user accounts in the United States. In other words, students are going to experience the internet before we think they may, whether we teach them about it or not. It is better to be ahead of the game, than too late.

Another suggestion the NJCAHT made, specifically to parents, to combat this danger on the internet, is to carefully monitor their children's activities on social media, even ones that are advertised as "kid-friendly." Lt. Pizzuro shared a list of twenty apps including kid friendly apps such as, Fortnite and Minecraft, and said they have made an arrest on every single one because an individual attempted to exploit children. The reason this is not because of the app, but what the app allows. Many of these popular kid apps do not require age verification and do not check identification so accounts with fake names and information can be created. And most importantly, these apps allow end-to-end encryption which means only the communicating users can read the messages, but not any third-party. This creates a huge concern in today's society where there is an epidemic of child grooming because only the predator and victim can see these messages, not law enforcement. Normally the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children would receive a cyber-tip from the electronic service provider if there was suspected reports of enticement of children for sexual act, trafficking, grooming, etc., on their application, but with end-to-end encryption, that is not possible. For these providers of these social media apps, it is all about business and what brings them profit, which mean protecting their privacy. However, by protecting their privacy, they are inhibiting law enforcement from protecting children from being groomed and exploited.

Online exploitation by predators has increased by over 200% due to the large implications COVID-19 has placed on everyday life in the United States. However, this alarming statistic is not reaching everyone and this epidemic of child grooming is going unnoticed. As Danny Papa said, "The biggest obstacle is empathy. It is empathy that changes reality." In the year of 2020, no one will leave this year scratch-free. We have all faced a large mental-toll from quarantine, losing jobs, not seeing friends, family members and losing loved ones to COVID. Hence, we know pain all too well. If we gain anything from 2020, I hope it is empathy and the ability to recognize and support the hardships of others. With the powerful tool of empathy, we can come together to combat the prevalent issue of

child grooming, that has only gotten worse since March 2020. As a future educator, this information made me feel empowered as I have the ability to make a difference and educate my students on internet safety before it is too late. For parents, you should feel empowered too. You have the ability to make your children feel loved and accepted everyday so that they don't look to dangerous means to fill this void. When it comes to the welfare of our children, it is no time to sit back. We must be the change.

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