What Parents Should Know to Protect their Kids and Youth Online

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH PLAYING ONLINE GAMES

Abstract

In Canada, the danger for children and youth in online gaming does not stem from specific games being inherently "dangerous," but rather from the unmoderated social interactions within them and the sophisticated tactics of online predators and violent extremist groups.

Games and platforms popular with youth, such as Roblox, Minecraft, Discord, Twitch, and Steam, are used by these actors to target and exploit vulnerable individuals.

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THE NATURE OF THE THREATS

- The primary dangers identified by Canadian authorities like the RCMP and the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) include:

ONLINE SEXUAL GROOMING AND EXPLOITATION

- Predators build trust with victims, often starting in public game chats and moving to private platforms like Discord and Telegram.
- They coerce children into self-harm, producing child sexual exploitation material, or other violent acts through threats and psychological control (sextortion).

ONLINE LURING AND SEX TRAFFICKING

- Online luring and sex trafficking are serious crimes where perpetrators use digital platforms to manipulate and coerce victims for sexual exploitation.
- Online luring is a primary method for recruitment into sex trafficking, especially of vulnerable youth.

RADICALIZATION TO VIOLENCE

- Violent online groups (such as "The Com" or "764 network") are targeting youth to participate in acts of extreme violence, cruelty, and gore.
- They desensitize victims and promote extreme ideologies.

EXPOSURE TO INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

- Children can be exposed to violent, sexual, or hate-filled content through unmoderated in-game advertisements, links, or unfiltered chat features.

CYBERBULLYING AND HARASSMENT

- Online gaming environments can be toxic, with players "griefing" (deliberately making the game less enjoyable for others) and engaging in harassment.

FINANCIAL RISKS

- "Freemium" games often encourage in-app purchases, which children may make without understanding they are using real money tied to a parent's credit card.

PRIVACY & SECURITY RISKS

- Poor parental controls, data collection by studios, and malicious links/downloads pose threats to privacy and device security.

ADDICTION & MENTAL HEALTH

- Excessive gaming can interfere with sleep, school, and real-world interactions, causing unhappiness.

WARNING SIGNS FOR PARENTS

Parents should be alert to the following potential indicators of harm:

- Increased secrecy about online activities.
- Sudden withdrawal from regular friends and family.
- Extended time spent on new or unknown platforms.
- Use of specific numbers (e.g., "764"), symbols, or coded language in usernames/bios.
- Receiving anonymous gifts.
- Drastic changes in behaviour or a new online "friend" they seem infatuated with or scared of.

PROACTIVE SAFETY MEASURES

Canadian authorities recommend several strategies for parents and caregivers to ensure children's online safety:

OPEN COMMUNICATION

- Have open and judgement-free conversations with your child about online risks and ensure they know they can come to you if something makes them uncomfortable.

GET INVOLVED

- Learn about the games and platforms your children use. Play with them to understand the environment and the security features available.

USE PARENTAL CONTROLS

- Utilize the parental controls offered by gaming platforms and devices to manage communication, time limits, and spending.

SET BOUNDARIES

- Establish clear rules for technology use, such as no-tech zones/times (e.g., during meals) and the understanding that you own the devices and have the authority to monitor their use.

TEACH DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

- Educate children on how to be a good digital citizen and the importance of not sharing personal information or talking to strangers online.

RESOURCES FOR HELP

If you suspect your child is being targeted or involved in a harmful online situation, contact law enforcement immediately and reach out to the following Canadian resources:

9-1-1:

- Call 911 immediately if your child or someone you know is in immediate danger.

9-8-8:

- Call or text 988 if you, your child, or someone you know is considering suicie

CYBERTIP.CA:

- Canada's national tipline for reporting online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

PROTECTKIDSONLINE.CA:

- Provides information and resources for parents on age-specific risks and proactive safety strategies.

KIDS HELP PHONE:

- Offers support for youth who need someone to talk to anonymously.

NEEDHELPNOW.CA:

- Provides support for youth dealing with issues arising from sexting incidents and information on how to get content removed online.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO (CANADIAN RESOURCES)

STAY INFORMED & ENGAGED:

- Understand the games your kids play, use resources like ProtectKidsOnline.ca and Tech Safety Canada.

HAVE OPEN CONVERSATIONS

- Talk regularly about online risks, grooming, and appropriate responses, using guides from Canada.ca.

USE PARENTAL CONTROLS

- Restrict access to harmful content and manage screen time with tools on devices and platforms, as recommended by Canadian Paediatric Society.

REPORT INCIDENTS

- Report abuse and exploitation to Cybertip.ca and seek help from KidsHelpPhone.ca.

CHECK GAME RATINGS

- Use ESRB ratings for age-appropriate content.

By staying involved and setting boundaries, parents can help children navigate online games safely, even as new platforms emerge.

ONLINE LURING

- Online luring occurs when an individual (typically an adult) communicates with a minor via technology (social media, gaming apps, chat rooms) to facilitate a sexual offense.
- This process is also referred to as "grooming," where the offender builds a trusting relationship over time to lower a victim's inhibitions and identify vulnerabilities.

KEY TACTICS USED BY OFFENDERS INCLUDE:

- Impersonating peers or romantic partners to build trust and eliminate "stranger danger".
- Using flattery, compliments, and promises of gifts, money, or a better life to attract victims.
- Encouraging secret conversations or moving communication to private, less familiar platforms (e.g., Snapchat, Telegram, Kik) that parents are less likely to monitor.
- Exposing victims to sexual content or coercing them into sending their own explicit images/videos, which can then be used for blackmail or extortion (sextortion).

SEX TRAFFICKING

- Sex trafficking is a form of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, which can involve sexual slavery, forced prostitution, and the creation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM).
- Traffickers often adapt their tactics to exploit modern technology and social media.
- Online luring can be a direct pathway to sex trafficking when the offender convinces the victim to meet in person.
- Once a victim is lured, traffickers may use violence, manipulation, and false promises to force them into the sex trade.
- A particularly insidious form is cybersex trafficking, where victims are transported to locations with webcams (known as 'cybersex dens') and forced to perform sexual acts that are live streamed to a paying audience online.

WARNING SIGNS

- Awareness of the warning signs is crucial for prevention. Look for changes in behavior such as:
- A child or youth receiving an unusual number of new social media followers or friend requests from strangers.
- Sudden secretiveness about online activities or hiding their phone/computer screens.
- A new online "friend" who has an intense, fast-moving relationship with the victim, often with a large age or power gap.
- The child or youth begins receiving expensive gifts or money from an unknown source.
- Posting information online that indicates vulnerability, such as feelings of rejection or family problems.

HOW TO GET HELP AND REPORT

When considering whether or not to report any suspicions to police, remember: Your report could be the missing piece that prevents life altering consequences to a child or youth.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

- 9-1-1:
  - If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call emergency services 9-1-1
- 9-8-8:
  - If you or someone you know is considering suicide.

NON-EMERGENCIES

- Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline:
  - Call 1-833-900-1010 for support resources and to report potential cases across Canada.

RESOURCES FOR HELP

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PROTECTKIDSONLINE.CA:

- Provides information and resources for parents on age-specific risks and proactive safety strategies.

KIDS HELP PHONE:

- Offers support for youth who need someone to talk to anonymously.

NEEDHELPNOW.CA:

- Provides support for youth dealing with issues arising from sexting incidents and information on how to get content removed online.

TAKE IT DOWN

- Having nudes online is scary, but there is help for you to get it taken down.
- This service is one step you can take to help remove online nude, partially nude, or sexually explicit photos and videos taken before you were 18

VIOLENT ONLINE GROUPS TARGETING VULNERABLE CHILDREN

- A Royal Canadian Mounted Police Document
- Source: https://rcmp.ca/en/federal-policing/national-security/violent-online-groups-exploiting-children-and-youth

SUMMARY

- Violent online groups are targeting and manipulating vulnerable children and youth across widely accessible online platforms to participate in acts of violence, including but not limited to, self-harm, torturing and killing animals, and producing child sexual exploitation material.
- There are multiple groups, associations and evolving subgroups that make up the online network known as “The Com” – short for community. “The Com” is a virtual community of groups and individuals who conduct illicit activities that glorify serious violence, cruelty, and gore.
- Elements of “The Com” network are known to have extreme ideological views and are victimizing children through desensitizing and radicalizing them to violence.

WHY ARE THEY A CONCERN?

“The Com” network deliberately targets, victimizes and recruits vulnerable children and youth between the ages of 8 and 17 years old. Members of “The Com” are threatening, harassing, extorting, coercing and encouraging vulnerable persons and youth to:

- engage in explicit acts or sexually exploit others
- harm or kill family pets or other animals
- perform self-harm
- attempt or complete suicide
- conduct other acts of serious violence

VULNERABLE PERSONS

Vulnerable persons include children or youth who struggle with mental health issues such as depression. Predators are victimizing children or youth for many reasons including:

- building up their online notoriety “clout chasing”
- furthering ideological motivations and degrading society
- recruiting
- vetting/initiating and radicalizing others
- desensitizing children and youth in preparation for further violence.

WHERE AND HOW THEY OPERATE?

- These groups operate virtually in very accessible online spaces such as social media platforms, applications (apps) and online games (such as Discord, Telegram, Roblox, Minecraft, Twitch and Steam).
- Predators use grooming processes that can include establishing trusting or romantic relationships; or using power or coercive tactics to get victims to engage in serious violence, self harm, or gore activities.
- This almost always escalates over time but can also increase rapidly. The predator influences the child or youth into conducting acts that increasingly shame, incriminate, or isolate them, making them vulnerable to further exploitation.

GROOMING

These acts can include recording or photographing themselves, siblings or others:

- in sexually explicit poses
- committing sexual acts or sexually exploiting others
- harming or killing animals, including family pets
- harming others or self-harming
- attempting or dying by suicide
- committing other acts of violence

VICTIMS HAVE ALSO BEEN PRESSURED TO PERFORM:

- Cut signs
- Names/online handle(s) of group members carved into a victim's skin and/or pets/animals
- Fan signs
- Names written on notes or pieces of paper placed beside items (for example, dead animals, cut wounds)
- Blood signs
- Names written in blood, often on the floor, a note, skin, or a wall

As victims provide photos and videos to their predators, they are shared within "The Com" network, further shaming the victim and creating content for the group. Most importantly, predators do so with the objective of gaining notoriety within "The Com" network as these instances of victimization are seen as a success and a "claim to fame". This process can leave the victim feeling that it would be almost impossible to stop or escape.

PREDATORY TACTICS

Some tactics employed by members within "The Com" network include:

- threats to publicly post and/or share the explicit or violent content with the victim's family/friends
- maliciously obtaining and publishing the victim's personally identifiable information on the internet (doxing)
- making a false report of an incident to law enforcement so emergency services are dispatched to a victim's home or school (swatting), demonstrating power while further isolating and threatening the victim
- threatening to report the victim's activities to law enforcement or their school to get them in trouble
- directly or indirectly threatening the security and wellbeing of the victim, family members/associates

WARNING SIGNS AND REPORTING

Key indicators that your child could be the target of members of "The Com" network:

- They are on mobile apps like Discord, Telegram or other encrypted communications platforms for which you have no visibility as a parent
- Family pets or other animals are being harmed or die suspiciously
- You notice a family pet is uncharacteristically avoiding or fearful of your child or you
- They are demonstrating an interest or affinity to extreme messaging online, including conspiracy theories, anti-government rhetoric, or sympathy/support toward extreme messaging or online propaganda
- They are demonstrating a newfound and abrupt interest in questioning or rejecting moral constraints on their behaviour, together with an interest in Nazism, school shootings, serial killers, or occultism
- Writing in blood or what appears to be blood
- They have a new online "friend" or network they seem infatuated with and/or scared of
- They are receiving anonymous gifts: items delivered to your home, currency, gaming currency or other virtual items
- They are covering their skin in unusual ways
- They are going through more bandages, or showing evidence of cuts, carvings on their skin, stab wounds and more
- They are more quiet than usual and uncharacteristically withdrawn
- They are excessively moody and on edge
- Their grades are dropping
- They are spending more time on the internet, unsupervised or alone in their room
- They are spending more money online or asking for money more often than usual

- They are scrawling names and/or numbers in notebooks, diaries, loose papers

PARENTS

- These indicators alone may not appear to be significant, however when considering them in clusters or with the totality of circumstances, they could have more meaning and reason for concern.
- Parents, guardians, and other adults should remain mindful these are indicators that a child or youth is being targeted.
- It is critical that parents and caregivers maintain open communication with their children about healthy online relationships, monitor their online activities, promote online safety, and familiarize themselves with all apps and technology their children and youth are using.
- Maintaining and fostering an open dialogue with your children will empower them to approach you in the event they are being victimized.
- Do not judge but rather approach the situation with support and understanding.

When considering whether or not to report any suspicions to police, remember: Your report could be the missing piece that prevents life altering consequences to a child or youth.

RESOURCES FOR HELP

If you suspect your child is being targeted or involved in a harmful online situation, contact law enforcement immediately and reach out to the following Canadian resources:

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DANGEROUS ONLINE GAMES

- https://www.kiddy123.com/article/6-most-dangerous-online-games-for-children-apps-and-smart-toys-you-must-avoid
- Here are some dangerous online games, apps or smart toys that can make your kid fall prey to cyber-bullies, paedophiles and even be urged to commit suicide.

INTRODUCTION

- Remember when you were a kid and you would play games with your friends like hide and seek, tag, or climb trees, catch insects and just cycle around the neighbourhood?
- Your toys would mostly consist of stuffed animals, action figures, skipping ropes, footballs, hula-hoops and you also had a mini library of story books.
- Modern technology has introduced a whole new world of interactive games and smart toys that can walk and talk, so the generation of kids nowadays are quite familiar with touchscreens and keyboards.
- It's difficult to completely avoid exposing your little ones to screen time, or to shield them from all these fancy new gadgets — and you must also admit that sometimes it is sort of a life-saver for you after a long day and you just need a few minutes to yourself!
- But are all these online games, apps and smart toys for children and youths really all that innocent?

EXAMPLES OF DANGEROUS ONLINE GAMES

Here are six dangerous online games and AI toys you should definitely be crossing off the list and keeping far away from your precious kids!

1. ROBLOX

- Paedophiles can easily communicate with your child via the Roblox game chat feature
- What is it?: This online gaming platform is popular with kids, teens and even adults, which allows users to interact with one another in this virtual world, play games and also engage in role play.
- The dangers to your child: The game's chat feature allows online predators such as paedophiles to communicate with your child and send him sexually explicit messages.
- When Iain Morrison decided to play this game which was popular with his two young sons, he was shocked to discover that there were adults who were complete strangers sending him messages online.
    - "They said 'hi' so I said 'hi' and they asked if I was a boy or girl and my age, so I said I was an eight-year-old boy. They asked me to follow them to their [virtual] house, then into the bedroom and asked me to lay down on top of them and then they started with the sexual movements."

- "Then, they said, 'you look cute' and 'you look sexy'. It was sickening reading all the comments pop up. My kids were completely oblivious as to what the words and stuff meant."
- "It's full of f**king paedophiles if you ask me, it's completely messed up it turned my guts, anyways it's deleted off their computers forever and I'd highly recommend you check your kids to see if they have it and get rid of it", he warns other parents.

2. MY FRIEND CAYLA

- The "My Friend Cayla" might be spying on your child
- What is it? This smart toy looks like an innocent baby doll with pretty features, lovely hair, a sweet smile, and an equally adorable outfit.
- It is so smart that it can even talk to your kid and ask her personal questions.
- The dangers to your child: Regulators in Germany have classified the Cayla dolls which are equipped with built-in microphones as "hidden espionage devices" and are even urging parents to destroy this toy!
- They caution parents that this doll will be able to steal your child's information and also any other details about you and your family that she might share with her toy.
- The Electronic Privacy Information Center has also stated that this smart toy "violates privacy rules [by] recording conversations and transmitting audio files to a remote server without parental consent."

3. BLUE WHALE

- The horrifying "Blue Whale" game encourages vulnerable youths to harm themselves and ultimately take their own lives
- What is it? This social media game dares its players to also participate in a series of tasks which are detrimental to their health and can also cause them great harm.
- The dangers to your child: As each "level" progresses, it gets increasingly dangerous.
- Examples of the various "tasks" assigned include:
- Waking up at 4.20am
- Watching horror movies all day long
- Cutting yourself with knives or razors
- Carving words or symbols (such as a blue whale) onto your own body
- At the highest and final level of the game, your child will be instructed to commit suicide.
- Some teen deaths have already been linked to this disturbing online game when youths in Russia jumped to their deaths either from high-rise buildings or in front of oncoming trains.

4. FIRE FAIRY

- The "Fire Fairy" is a dangerous children's game which targets younger kids.
- What is it?: This online prank targets younger children and is modelled after the animated series, Winx Club.

- It gives dangerous instructions to unsuspecting kids on how they can become a magical "fire fairy".
- The dangers to your child: Your little one will be encouraged to secretly turn on the gas on the stove at midnight when no one else is awake, and then go back to sleep.
- Some of the instructions say, "The magic gas will come to you, you will breathe it while sleeping and, in the morning, when you wake up, say 'Thank you Alfeya, I've become a fairy'. And you will become a real fairy of fire."
- A five-year-old girl has already fallen victim to this horrific game and suffered severe burns to her body when she thought she could be turned into a "fire fairy" as promised online.

5. CLOUD PETS

- Your child's CloudPet can actually be hacked.
- What is it? These innocent-looking smart toys which come as a cuddly elephant, bear, cat, rabbit, dog or unicorn can record audio messages via a mobile app and replay them for your child's entertainment.
- The dangers to your child: Application security expert, Troy Hunt, reported that private information from the CloudPets database has been leaked and not only did it contain audio messages by its users, but their profile pictures and privacy were also compromised.
- The private messages sent between you and your child can also be hacked, as well as your passwords and emails!
- Parents should be wary of this smart toy because private information and your little one's pictures that fall in the wrong hands can be used in a negative way.

6. THE LETTER X

- The "Letter X" is an online bullying game found on Snapchat
- What is it? The latest trend on the online app, Snapchat, is called "The Letter X", where users will target someone by coming up with hurtful insults about their physical appearance, weight or personality.
- The dangers to your child: This cruel game is a form of cyber-bullying and can even lead youths to commit suicide.
- When Rachaele Hambleton's 12-year-old daughter confided in her about this horrible new game, she wrote a personal message on social media and shared it with other parents:
- "I just want to raise awareness because so many mums wouldn't know about this sort of thing. There's so much peer pressure out there. Bullying is just endless now because of mobile phones", she says.

When considering whether or not to report any suspicions to police, remember: Your report could be the missing piece that prevents life altering consequences to a child or youth.

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