May 4, 2020: In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s easy to lose sight of possible harm to children from predators using this time of crisis to groom children online for exploitation and trafficking. The New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking (NJCAHT) has been raising the alarm on this issue for several weeks, encouraging families to have important conversations with their children about staying safe when they play games or use apps, since increased screen time makes children more susceptible to predators. The FBI has also urged vigilance during the pandemic, warning “children who are home from school and spending more time online may be at increased risk for exploitation”. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children says it has recorded a 106% increase in CyberTipline reports of suspected child sexual exploitation during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Predators and traffickers use subtle methods to groom children for exploitation and future trafficking. Grooming can start out with “likes” on social media, and move to buying children gaming dollars or offering support and encouragement. Predators understand the need children have to be liked and validated on social media, along with the isolation it can cause when children feel they are not included in pictures posted by their friends. Predators try to give children the attention they seek online, and once they have gained a child’s trust, they will attempt to exploit them.

The NJCAHT hosted a virtual training on Trafficking and Exploitation on Apps and the Dark Web on April 23, 2020; available now on their website. Over 250 participants from multiple states joined to listen to the presentation by Lieutenant John Pizzuro of the New Jersey State Police’s Internet Crimes Against Children Unit, and Jeffrey Anthony, Health Educator from the Middlesex County Center for Empowerment. Lt. Pizzuro warned: “The increase of online screen time during the COVID-19 pandemic, and lack of structured activity and play with friends due to social distancing, leaves children vulnerable to grooming and providing Child Sexual Abuse Material.” He shared that one in five children have been sexually solicited online and 14% have actually met face to face with someone they met online.

Lt. Pizzuro explained that children today communicate through devices, and due to their susceptibility to manipulation, they often share personal information. This information helps predators in the grooming process, which often can lead to the predator getting the child outside of the home for an in-person meeting when the opportunity presents itself. The availability of anonymous social media apps allows people to create profiles with any age and information they want, making it easier for predators to connect
with children while pretending to be children themselves. Furthermore, many apps and providers protect the privacy of their users, hindering the ability of the police to track communications between predators and victims.

Families are urged to have immediate conversations with their children about people with whom they might be connecting with online, and how to have healthy interactions. It is helpful and wise to encourage children to communicate online with those whom they already know and trust offline, and teach them to recognize and end uncomfortable interactions. Parents need to communicate the risks in an age-appropriate way, and monitor their children’s social media and web activities while fostering an environment of trust. Predators use shame as a tool to further manipulate children, so if parents can ensure a child will feel safe sharing any uncomfortable interactions they may have experienced, they can prevent predators manipulating their children still further.

Kate Lee, the Executive Director of the NJCAHT states: “It is imperative that families are made aware of the risks of online grooming, and how that can lead to exploitation and trafficking. The information provided by the NJCAHT on its website will explain the risks but also provide solutions, leaving families feeling empowered to have important conversations with their children, which will keep them safe from online predators now and in the future.”

The New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking is a nonprofit made up of over 180 organizations in New Jersey, with a mission to unite NJ communities to abolish human trafficking. The virtual training can be found on the NJCAHT website alongside other COVID-19 online safety resources at: www.njhumantrafficking.org/covid19. To report child exploitation go to https://report.cybertip.org