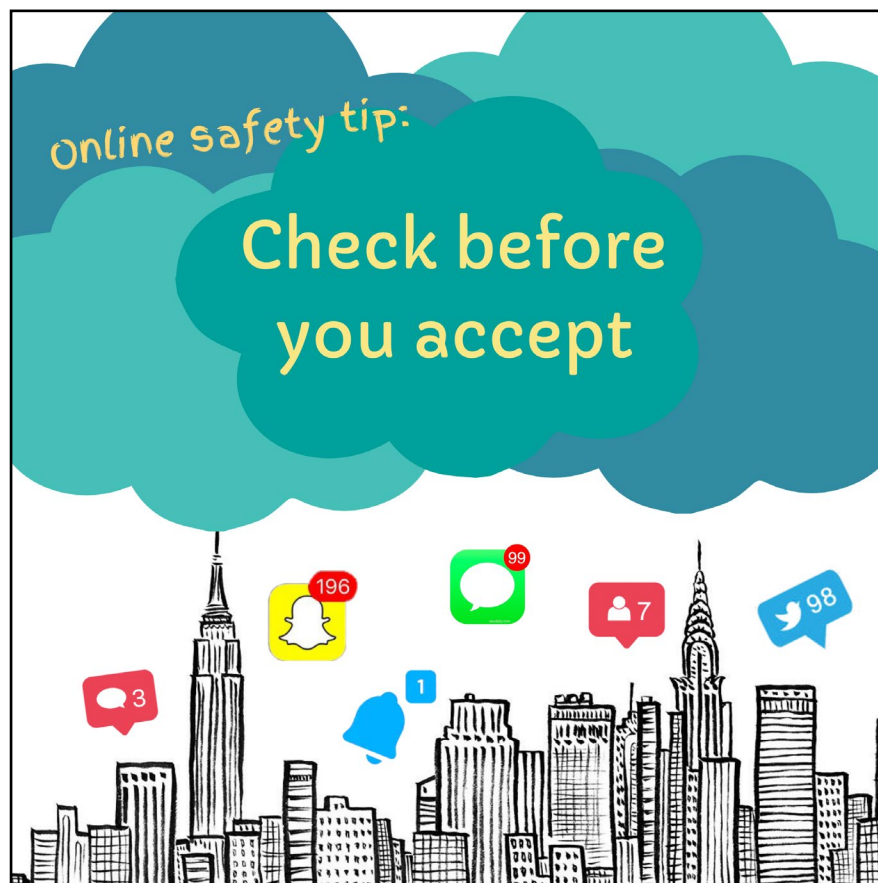# A Guide to Online Safety During The COVID-19 Outbreak

While you have been getting information about how to reduce the risk of contracting the coronavirus, there are other ways to stay safe that go beyond handwashing and coughing into your sleeve. It's more important than ever to think about your online safety.

Why Worry About Social Media?

With most schools closed for the next few weeks, you'll likely be spending much more time in a virtual world - distance learning has replaced in-class instruction, and there is more free time to browse the internet and check out social media. At the same time, all this change is unsettling, and it's natural to want a support network. It's normal to want to cultivate these relationships, especially right now, but to make smart decisions, you need to be informed. Since "social distancing" started, we've seen a number of posts offering helpful hints to "stay connected" with others online. That's fine if you have one or more trusted friends and are in regular contact with them. Unfortunately, there are online criminals who want to take advantage of our need to stay in touch with one another. This guide will share some basic terms and tips for you to stay safe while staying connected.
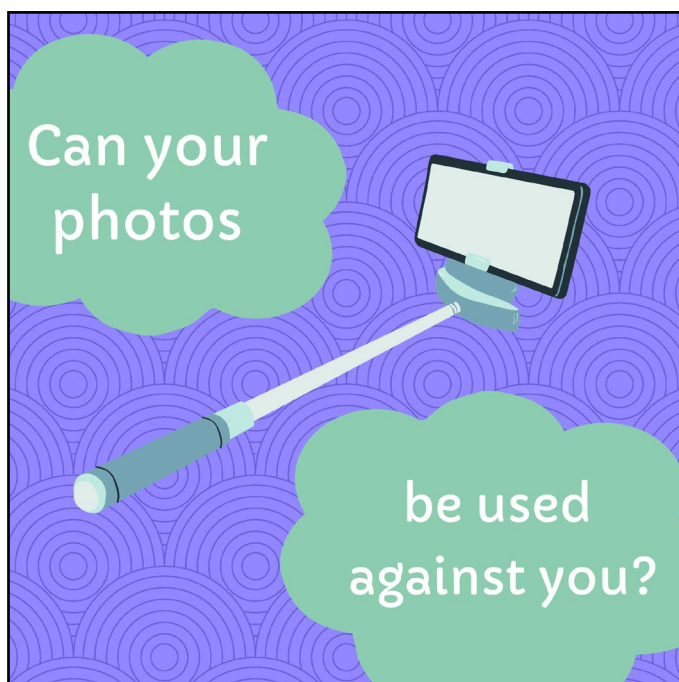
Catfishing

"Catfishing" is when a person creates a fake online identity to trick someone into thinking that they want to have a relationship, often romantic. The "catfish" watches what a potential victim posts on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram or SnapChat, etc., in order to figure out the best way to manipulate them. They may make false promises of modeling, traveling, becoming famous or winning money. To the victim, the new friend can seem like a dream come true, someone who really cares, until it turns into a nightmare. The catfish will try to convince an individual to do things to prove their love and pressure you into exploitation. Some examples are covered below.

Sexting

"Sexting" happens when someone sends sexually explicit photographs or messages to another person. Though it can seem harmless, there are many dangerous consequences and you should never send these images to any person.

- It is a crime to make, send or receive sexually explicit images of anyone under the age of 18. Some states have different penalties when both the person sending and person receiving the images are under 18, but it's always illegal.
- Once a sexually explicit photograph of you is sent to someone else, it's just about impossible to get it back. That image can be distributed to anyone or anywhere: your family, your friends, your school community, and your present or future employers. These images will stay online forever and, although it is a crime, there is a whole underground market of predators exchanging them.

The combination of illegal activity combined with inability to shut it down can lead to a catfish's favorite tool for abuse: sextortion.

Sextortion

Sextortion is a form of blackmail, when a catfish or other predator threatens to spread sexual images of you unless you do as they say. Often, that means a victim has to send even more nude images or be filmed performing sex acts. What starts off as one image can quickly lead to sending dozens, as victims are terrified that their friends and family will find out.

Revenge Porn

"Revenge Porn" occurs when someone shares private pictures meant only for them — sometimes after a breakup. It's actually image-based sexual abuse, often by an angry ex-partner who wants to control the other person in the relationship. Unlike sextortion, revenge porn might not have a demand that the victim do anything else-the abuser is looking to inflict harm.

What is Child Sex Trafficking?

If you are under 18 years of age and being bought or sold for sex, you are a victim of child sex trafficking. Young people are also victims of sex trafficking when they trade sex for food, shelter, safety, pocket money-even drugs. It doesn't matter if you agree to have sex in exchange for these things, or think that it's your fault for making "bad choices." The person buying or selling you knows that you are more likely to blame yourself than anyone else, and they are taking advantage of that. Traffickers can be male or female, even family members. They are often adults, but in some cases, traffickers use other trafficked children to recruit new victims, or teens may recruit one another. Under the law, anyone under the age of 18 cannot consent to be sold for sex. It's not your fault, and you deserve protection, not criticism.

Online Safety Tips

Do:

- **Know Your Audience**. Only share your profile and use social media to connect with people you actually know; deny requests from those you don't.
- **Control How People Find You.** Make sure your settings on social media accounts are private to your friends only. Catfishers, traffickers, and predators often target youths with accounts with public information as it is easier to connect with you.
- **Resist Temptation to Share Information.** Keep your address, full birthday, and phone number off your account. Catfish often target children.
- **Talk To A Trusted Adult.** If anyone asks you to take a revealing picture, sends you an image or tries to pressure you into performing a sex act, report it to the police and your parents or other trusted adult. It's not your fault and you are a crime victim in need of protection.

Don't:

- **Don't Send Nudes.** Don't take or share nude images of yourself. Really. It's not worth it.
- **Don't Give Into Pressure.** If someone is claiming that the only way to show your love is to send them a nude image, that person DOES NOT LOVE YOU. People who truly love you never make such hurtful/harmful demands.
- **Don't Share Sexually Explicit Images.** If someone sends you sexually explicit photos, do not share them with anyone else, as sending them to another person could be considered a crime. Keep the image on your device and report it to law enforcement.
- **Don't Make Plans To Meet IRL.** Avoid meeting, sending money, images, or messages to any strangers and people you don't personally know.
- **Don't Ignore Your Gut.** If someone is offering you a job or other opportunity to make money that seems too good to be true, it is.

How To Get Help If You Are A Victim Of Online Sexual Abuse

NCMEC (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children) - 1-800-THE-LOST
NCMEC's CyberTipline is the nation's centralized reporting system for the online exploitation of children.

National Human Trafficking Hotline - (888) 373-7888 or text 233733
Also offers an online chat. All are available 24/7 in English and Spanish, or in 200 additional languages through an on-call interpreter.

For more information on ECPAT-USA's youth program, follow us on Instagram @youthagainsttrafficking.