

Digital Safety and Online Exploitation Prevention

A Guide for Parents, Guardians, and Community Members in Dutchess County

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Online exploitation isn't just something that happens "somewhere else." It's a real issue affecting children right here in Dutchess County. While apps and social platforms are great for learning and staying connected, they can also be misused. Across New York State, reports to the CyberTipline have reached new highs. In 2025 alone, there were over 21.3 million reports involving more than 61.8 million images, videos, and files tied to suspected child exploitation. Local law enforcement in Dutchess County and nearby counties has also seen a rise in "sextortion" cases.

Sextortion happens when someone pressures or manipulates a young person into sending explicit images, then uses those images to threaten them, often demanding money or more content. What makes this especially concerning for parents, guardians, and community members is how targeted it can be. Predators may use social media clues such as locations, geotags, backgrounds of photos, school or sport team names, etc. to identify kids at specific schools, parks, or neighborhoods, meaning the risk is much closer to home than many realize.

For parents, guardians, and community members, staying ahead of this issue means shifting from simply "keeping an eye" on devices to actively managing digital safety. Start with privacy settings, and make sure location services are turned off for all social media and gaming apps. Many apps default to sharing precise locations, which can unintentionally expose where children and teens spend time. It's also important to talk openly about the myth of disappearing or deleted content. Even if a message or photo is meant to vanish or if they delete it, screenshots, screen recordings, sending it to others, and devices' or accounts' being hacked or shared with others can make it permanent. Setting a household rule that accounts stay private and that only known, trusted people are accepted can go a long way.

Another key piece is recognizing when something feels off. If a child or teen becomes super secretive about their phone, seems more anxious than usual, or starts pulling away from friends and family, those could be warning signs. Getting random gifts, money, or packages from someone online is another major red flag, and can be part of grooming. The most important thing? Talk about it. Whether it's a parent/guardian, teacher, or trusted adult, having open, judgment-free conversations can make a huge difference and stop situations before they get worse.

For parents, guardians, and community members who want to feel more confident navigating these challenges, the Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse offers a training called Digital Safety & Online Exploitation (DSOE). This general awareness training is designed for parents, caregivers, and community

The Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse



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members, and covers topics like grooming, sexting/sexortion, digital reputation, and cyberbullying, along with practical ways to keep children safe online. While it doesn't focus on specific apps, the strategies apply across any platform. The training is open to all adults (18+), requires no prior knowledge, and provides real tools families can use right away. Because it addresses sensitive topics, it's designed specifically for adults, but it's a valuable step for anyone who wants to better protect the children in their lives.

If something does happen, there are trusted resources available to help. The Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse provides advocacy and education for children and families. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children operates “[Take It Down](#)”, a tool that helps remove or stop the spread of explicit images involving minors. Parents can also contact the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office to report suspicious contact or ongoing harassment.

To formally report exploitation, use the CyberTipline. Reports can be submitted online or by calling 1-800-THELOST, which is available 24/7. If you believe your child, or any child, is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local police right away. Staying informed, involved, and approachable can make all the difference in keeping your child safe online.

Local Contact Information:

The CPCA (Dutchess County): (845) 454-0595 | thecpca.org

Dutchess County Sheriff's Office: (845) 486-3800

National CyberTipline: report.cybertip.org