

## **Sextortion is a Real Threat to your Tween/Teen**

If your teen has their own phone and access to social media accounts, you, as a parent, need to be aware of what sextortion is. Sextortion is a growing threat, and understanding what it is and talking to your teen about it is crucial.

So what is it? Sextortion is a form of blackmail where a predator coerces a victim into sending sexually explicit images or videos. The predator then uses these images to demand more pictures or, more commonly, money.

You may be thinking, “That wouldn’t ever be my kid,” because they would be able to tell if the DM is from a friend or not, and they would never send someone a picture that they didn’t know or send a photo at all. Unfortunately, these criminals create fake online accounts, and friend lots of teens in the same geographic area, so when your teen looks at the account he/she sees that this “teen” is friends with their same friends. This leads your teen to believe that this is another teenager from around here. The fake account will start DM-ing your teen to build a friend or romantic relationship, ultimately building trust. Eventually, they might send an explicit image of their own (which is often stolen or fake) and then pressure your child to do the same. Once they have the material, the threats begin. The criminals frequently threaten to send the photos to the victim's friends, family, or social media followers unless their demands are met.

While any teen can be a victim, recent data from law enforcement agencies like the FBI and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) reveals a specific trend: teen boys between the ages of 14 and 17 are the most common targets of financially motivated sextortion.

There are several reasons why boys seem to be more likely targets. The criminals pose as teen girls to lure their victims, appealing to a teen boy’s desire for a relationship. Teen boys may feel pressure to have a relationship and are overeager to get involved with someone who shows them interest. Shame and a fear of social ruin can prevent teen boys from speaking up, whereas girls tend to be more likely to tell an adult or peers if this is happening to them. The thought of an embarrassing picture being shared with friends, sports teammates, or potential colleges can be so terrifying that boys feel they have no choice but to comply with the demands.

Only five hours north of Wisconsin Dells, in Marquette, Michigan, Jordan DeMay, a 17-year-old student was a victim of an international sextortion scheme (most of these fake accounts are created by adults in Nigeria). After getting a friend request on Instagram from someone posing to be a young woman (who had many friends in common with him), he was blackmailed for money with threats of sharing the nude photos he had sent. The nonstop threats and fear of public humiliation caused him to take his own life in 2022. This incident occurred in his basement bedroom within an 8-hour span. His parents were upstairs at home while this was happening. He played on the basketball team. He had a girlfriend. He was packed to leave for a spring break trip

with his family the next day. He had no signs of being suicidal. He simply engaged in an Instagram DM conversation with someone he thought was an interested girl paying him attention, and that spiraled into him sending money via Apple Pay and being threatened for more. When he couldn't pay and was told his pictures would be shared with everyone he knew, he didn't know what else to do. This heartbreaking story serves as a critical reminder of the immense emotional toll this crime takes on its victims. These are teens, not adults. They do not have fully functioning brains, and these schemes are designed by adult criminals to trick them into paying.

This is not a problem that randomly happened in Michigan, but isn't prevalent in Wisconsin. We have had students right here at WDHS come to our office looking for help after being targeted by sextortion schemes, schemes that start exactly like the story above. This highlights the urgent need to discuss your children's online communication with them.

The most important step you can take as a parent is to open that door of communication. Your child must know that you are a safe space, no matter what.

→ Don't wait for a problem to arise. Bring up online safety regularly, and use real-world stories or news headlines as a starting point. Explain that these criminals are targeting teens because they are considered easier targets.

→ If your child comes to you with a problem, **your first response must be one of full support. Do not start screaming and asking them how they could be so stupid.** Take a breath, get all the information, and then decide your next steps. Remind them that they are a victim and you will help them get it figured out.

→ Help your child understand that people online may not be who they say they are. Encourage them to be cautious with who they add on social media and gaming platforms. Discuss the "what if" scenarios: "What would you do if a 'friend' you just met online asked you for a picture?"

What to do if your child gets involved in a sextortion scheme:

1. Do Not Pay. Paying will not stop the threats; it only confirms that the criminals' tactics are working.
2. Do Not Delete Anything. Save all messages, photos, and any communication with the criminal. This evidence is vital for the police.
3. Block All Contact. Block the person on all platforms and social media accounts.
4. Contact the police immediately. This is a crime. You can also report it to NCMEC.
5. Seek Professional Support. Talk to a school counselor or a mental health professional. Don't just assume your child will bounce back from this. Anyone can call 988 to get advice about a challenging situation.

Our students exist in a digital world, and it is our job as parents to help them navigate it safely. Unfortunately, many of us did not grow up in a digital world, and we must ensure we stay informed about current events that did not exist in our childhoods.