When Online Harassment and Sexual Threats Enter Our Children's Lives

In recent weeks my social media pages have been overflowing with stories about the alarming rise of sexual threats and harassment among school-aged children. The flood of responses from parents has been overwhelming—stories of 12-year-olds receiving rape threats, teenagers being sexually harassed on school buses, and children as young as five being exposed to explicit content by classmates and even assaulted.

This isn't an issue affecting just a few unfortunate families. It's happening in private schools and public schools, in affluent areas and disadvantaged ones. And while girls are disproportionately the targets, both our sons and daughters are being harmed by this toxic culture.

As parents, we can feel powerless. But there are concrete actions we can take to protect our children and guide them through this challenging landscape.

Three Essential Strategies for Parents

1. Build a relationship where digital supervision feels like connection, not control.

Children thrive when they feel both autonomy and connection. The goal isn't surveillance but partnership. (Connection: feeling seen, heard, and valued.)

- For younger teens: Have regular, non-judgemental check-ins about their online activities. "Show me what you're enjoying online lately" works better than "I need to check your phone."
- Create technology agreements together rather than imposing rules. When teens help create boundaries, they're more likely to respect them.
- Require devices to be kept in shared spaces rather than bedrooms, especially overnight. Most concerning online activity happens late at night when supervision is minimal.
- Be honest about your concerns: "I worry about the things I've seen happening to other kids. I want to make sure you're safe."

The stronger your relationship, the more likely your child will accept guidance and share problems.

2. Create an environment where difficult conversations can happen

The parents who contact me after their child has been threatened or harassed often say the same thing: "I had no idea this was happening."

- Start conversations about online safety, pornography, and consent early—by age 11, many children have already been exposed to inappropriate content.
- Use news stories as conversation starters: "I read about this school where boys were sharing inappropriate images. What do you think about that?"

- Talk about pornography directly. Explain that it portrays unrealistic, often harmful versions of sex that don't represent healthy relationships.
- Create a "no-punishment zone" for reporting problems. Make it clear that coming to you about online issues won't result in having their devices taken away.

Your child needs to know they can come to you without fear of judgement or overreaction.

3. Raise children who protect rather than harm others

Whether you're raising sons or daughters, they need to understand their responsibility to others.

- Discuss the concept of digital citizenship—how we treat people online reflects our character. One conversation will never be enough. You'll need to be on repeat with this stuff.
- For sons particularly: Challenge "boys will be boys" attitudes directly. Explain that true strength comes from making others feel stronger and safer.
- For daughters: Empower them to set boundaries and recognise when someone is crossing them.
- Teach all children the importance of being "upstanders," not bystanders, when they witness harmful behaviour.
- Model respect within your own relationships and online interactions.

Finding the Courage to Parent Differently

The digital landscape our children navigate bears little resemblance to what most of us experienced growing up. The rules are different. The risks are greater. And the consequences can be devastating.

Rather than demanding blind compliance or offering complete freedom, our children need us to be both brave and receptive—establishing appropriate boundaries while maintaining open lines of communication.

This isn't about restricting their independence. It's about recognising that true autonomy develops through guidance, not abandonment. They need us to be engaged enough to notice warning signs, approachable enough to be trusted with problems, and courageous enough to have uncomfortable conversations.

The question isn't whether your child will encounter online harassment, inappropriate content, or pressure—it's whether they'll have the values, boundaries, and support to handle it when they do.

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