



New Mexico Department of Justice: How to Educate & Protect Children and Teens from Sextortion

Sextortion is a severe form of criminal activity, referred to as cybercrime, that has seen an alarming rise in recent years. It is a malicious practice or type of blackmail that involves the use of manipulation, coercion, and threats to obtain sexual favors or explicit content from the victim. Predominantly thriving on online platforms, sextortion is an evolving menace that has a profound impact on its young victims, particularly children and teenagers.

In New Mexico, sextortion has emerged as a significant concern. The state's children and teenagers, who are increasingly engaging with digital platforms for communication, education, and entertainment, are being easy targets for cybercriminals.

AI-Generated Images and Videos

Sextortion involving AI-generated images or videos, known as deepfakes, is a rapidly growing concern. Deepfakes, a term derived from "deep-learning" and "fake"*, represent the newest frontier of manipulated content. Deepfakes can be images, audio, or videos that depict individuals in situations they never actually participated in. By using digital-learning algorithms, cybercriminals can produce incredibly convincing fake videos or images simply by grafting one person's face onto another's body.



**The term deepfake combines deep, taken from AI deep-learning technology (a type of [machine learning](#) that involves multiple levels of processing), and fake, addressing that the content is not real. [Deepfake / History & Facts / Britannica](#)*

Impact of Sextortion on Children & Teens in NM

The effects of sextortion on children and teenagers are devastating. The emotional and psychological toll is immense, often leading to feelings of shame, depression, guilt, fear, and isolation. In some cases, the trauma may lead to extreme actions such as self-harm or suicide.

In 2022, there were 107 reports of sextortion by the end of May in New Mexico – an 83% increase since 2021*, according to the FBI. With 95% of teenagers having access to a smartphone*, the risk of falling prey to online predators is drastically increasing.

The impact goes beyond a single individual's experience. It affects families, schools, and communities, which contributes to an environment of fear and mistrust. Parents worry about their children's safety, schools struggle to educate students about online risks, and communities grapple with the challenge of protecting their youngest and most vulnerable members.

**[Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023 / Pew Research Center](#)*

**[Sextortion on the rise in New Mexico, particularly impacting youth \(koat.com\)](#)*



Combatting Sextortion

The fight against sextortion in New Mexico requires a multi-faceted approach. Awareness and education are critical for not only parents, teachers and guardians, but for children and teenagers, as well. All parties need to understand the risks involved with sharing personal or explicit content online. All parties should know how to recognize potential threats and understand the importance of reporting any suspicious activity to the authorities.

Law enforcement agencies must have the necessary tools and resources to investigate and prosecute those responsible for sextortion crimes. The New Mexico Department of Justice is working diligently with New Mexico law enforcement agencies and other organizations to provide training on how to best provide support to victims and bring the cybercriminals to justice.

Organizations like [Take It Down](#) provide free services that can help or stop online sharing of explicit images or videos taken of individuals when they were or are under the age of 18 years old.

Discussing Sextortion with Children and Teenagers

Sextortion is a serious form of cybercrime. Having a conversation with your child or teenager can help them understand what to watch out for and provide them with ways to protect themselves. It's also important to establish a safe space for them to share the good and bad things about their online experiences with you or a trusted adult.

- **Initiating the conversation about Sextortion:**
 - **Choose the right time and place:**
 - Find a calm and comfortable environment where you won't be interrupted. Ensure the child or teenager feels safe and relaxed. The conversation should be private and free from distractions, such as at home or in a quiet classroom.
 - **Begin with general topics:**
 - Begin by talking about their day or what they enjoy doing online – maybe how far they are in their most recent video game. This opens the door to a broader conversation about their online experiences.
 - **Keep the conversation age-appropriate:**
 - Use language that is suitable for the child's age and level of understanding. Be honest but avoid overly explicit details that could cause unnecessary fear or confusion.
 - **Explain what Sextortion is:**
 - Patiently and clearly define sextortion, explain that it involves someone threatening to share explicit content unless certain demands are met. Highlight that this behavior is illegal and a form of abuse.
 - **Communicate that they will not be in trouble:**
 - Emphasize that if they ever find themselves in such a situation, they will not be in trouble. Make sure they understand that the person committing the crime is the one at fault, not them.

- **Encourage questions:**
 - Pause to allow them to ask questions. This helps gauge their understanding and address misconceptions. It can also help to ask them questions to ensure they are active in the conversation.
- **Talk about the role of deepfakes:**
 - Explain the concept of deepfakes and how they can be used in sextortion. Make sure they understand that these fake images or videos may look real, but are created by cybercriminals for malicious purposes, and that it is still illegal.
- **Review the importance of not sharing personal or explicit content with anyone:**
 - Encourage them to keep personal information and images private. Explain that once something is shared online, it can be nearly impossible to remove and could potentially be used against them.
- **Reiterate that they are not alone:**
 - Assure them that they can always turn to you or a trusted adult, such as their teacher or school counselor, for help. Reinforce the idea that they don't have to face this alone if they are ever a victim of sextortion and that getting help is the best thing they can do both for themselves and to hold the cybercriminal accountable for their crimes.

- **Explain what to do if they become a victim:**
 - If they ever find themselves a victim of sextortion, they should:
 - Not respond to the perpetrator's demands.
 - Preserve any evidence, such as screenshots of messages or images.
 - Report the incident to a trusted adult immediately.
 - Report the incident to local law enforcement and online platforms where the incident occurred.
- **Ways to protect children and teenagers from sextortion:**
 - **Start the conversation early:**
 - Start discussing online safety with your child at an early age. Make sure they understand that the internet is a public space and anything that is shared online, include photos or personal information, can be seen by others.
 - **Foster open communication:**
 - Encourage your child to come to you if they encounter anything that makes them uncomfortable online. Assure them that they won't be blamed or punished and that their safety is your top priority.
 - **Protect personal information:**
 - Educate your child about the importance of keeping personal information private, including full name, address, phone number, school name, and any photos or videos that can be used to identify them or be used against them.

- **Help them set healthy boundaries:**
 - Establish rules together about what is acceptable to share online and what isn't. Ask questions to make sure your child understands that they should never send explicit content, even to friends. By building these rules together, it will help your child understand why these boundaries are in place. It's also important to review them regularly as your child grows older – the rules will likely need to change as they do.
- **Understanding privacy settings**:**
 - Review your child's online accounts with them and set the settings together. Respect their privacy but be aware of who they're interacting with online and what apps or websites they're using, even on gaming consoles.
- **Report suspicious activity:**
 - If your child becomes a victim of sextortion, report it immediately to local law enforcement.
- **Seek professional support:**
 - If your child has been a victim of sextortion, they may need professional support to help with the emotional trauma. Seek assistance of mental health professionals specializing in trauma.
- **Stay informed:**
 - It's important to stay up to date about the latest online threats and safety tips. Organizations, such as the [FBI's Safe Online Surfing program](#) offer resources to help parents, guardians and teachers keep children and teenagers safe online.

***See our Privacy Setting page and downloadable guide.*

Educating Children & Teenagers of the Dangers of AI-Generated Images and Videos Used for Sextortion

- **Basic Education about AI**
 - Begin the conversation by explaining what Artificial Intelligence (AI) is and how it can be used to create realistic images or videos of people that never actually occurred. Explain that these are called “deepfakes” and use age-appropriate language to ensure a clear understanding.
- **Creation of deepfake content:**
 - A cybercriminal can use an innocent photo or video of a child or teenager, often sourced from social media, and use advanced AI platforms to manipulate this content to create explicit images or videos. These images or videos can appear to feature the young person engaging in compromising activities that never occurred.
- **Threat and blackmail:**
 - Using the deepfake explicit material, the cybercriminal will contact the victim through social media or other online messaging apps. They threaten to release this damaging content online where it could be seen by friends, family, college admission boards, or employers unless the victim sends real explicit photos or videos.
- **Caught in the cycle:**
 - If the victim complies out of fear, the cybercriminal has real explicit content to use for further blackmail, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and exploitation.



The psychological impact of this form of sextortion and abuse on children and teenagers can be devastating, leading to depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide. It's critical for parents, guardians and teachers to be observant and aware of this threat and to educate young people about the dangers of oversharing personal information or images and videos online. Equally important is building and nurturing a supportive environment where children and teenagers feel safe reporting such incidents.

Identifying Signs of Online Sextortion

- **Sudden change in behavior:**
 - Look for a noticeable shift in mood or behavior as this is often a clear sign that something is wrong. This could include becoming withdrawn, depressed, anxious, aggressive, overly defensive, or overly secretive, especially about online activities.
- **Increased online activity**
 - If a child or teenager is spending an excessive amount of time online, especially if the amount of time has changed suddenly and is primarily in private, this could be a sign that something is wrong. If they are secretive or highly defensive about their activities or become distressed when unable to access the internet, these are also possible signs that there could be something going on.

- **Unusual emotionally driven responses after using devices:**
 - Watch out for signs of distress, fear, or anxiety following the use of a device. This may suggest that they've received threatening messages or inappropriate content and should raise a flag.
- **Avoidance of social or school events:**
 - Often feeling embarrassed or afraid, victims of sextortion may avoid school or social events to prevent facing the perpetrator if they are local or may self-isolate to avoid dealing with the situation. Victims may feel shame or guilt, which results in them feeling as though they are unworthy of good things, such as having fun with friends or participating in things they enjoyed before the crime occurred.
- **Unexpected messages, calls or notifications**
 - Frequent notifications, messages or calls from an unidentified source may be a sign of online harassment, especially if the child or teenager quickly closes or minimizes screens when others are close by.
- **Changes in sleep patterns or nightmares**
 - Sleep abnormalities may be a sign of anxiety or fear. Nightmares or difficulty sleeping could indicate a high level of stress. It's important to establish a safe environment with your child so they can feel comfortable approaching you if this begins to happen. Similarly, by establishing a safe environment, approaching your child with concern may be a better option.

- **Receiving gifts from unknown places or sources**
 - Perpetrators often groom their victims by sending money or gifts, such as video games, jewelry, or clothing. If your child receives unexpected gifts, particularly high-value items with no return address or sender information, this could be a red flag and should be monitored closely.
- **Signs of self-harm or suicidal thoughts or behaviors**
 - Victims of sextortion may resort to self-harm or express suicidal thoughts. While this is often displayed in extreme cases, if you notice any of these signs, seek professional help immediately.

How to Respond to Sextortion

- **Stay calm and offer support, not judgement or anger:**
 - Be sure to react calmly to ensure the child or teenager feels safe and supported. Express concern without displaying panic or excessive anger, which may cause them additional distress. Remind them that they are not at fault and will not get in trouble and that you are there to help them.
- **Document and save evidence:**
 - Preserve all relevant evidence and save it. This includes emails, text messages, social media messages, posts, comments, forum posts, or any other form of communication related to the sextortion. When in doubt about a message or communication, save it – it's better to have more than you need in terms of evidence. Screenshots can be helpful, but make sure to keep the original context intact to the best of your ability.

- **Do not engage with the perpetrator or take the matter into your own hands:**
 - Avoid interacting with the perpetrator. Responding or retaliating may escalate the situation or lead to the loss of valuable evidence. Remain calm.
- **Report to law enforcement immediately:**
 - Contact your local law enforcement agency and provide them with all available evidence. It's important to remember that sextortion is a crime, and authorities have protocols in place to handle such situations.
- **Report to online platforms:**
 - Make sure to report the incident to the relevant online platform where the interaction occurred. If the perpetrator contacted your child on multiple platforms, report the incident to each one. Most social media and online platforms have policies against sextortion and offer mechanisms for reporting such incidents. Reminder: Reporting to the social media or online platform will not notify law enforcement. You must contact law enforcement first to bring the cybercriminal to justice.
- **Consult a Mental Health Professional:**
 - Consider seeking support from a mental health professional. Experiencing traumatic abuse, such as sextortion, may need professional counseling to help the child cope with their feelings and help them begin to heal.

- **Implement safety measures:**
 - Reinforce online safety habits. Revisit privacy settings and encourage your child to only communicate with people they know in real life. Remind them to avoid sharing personal or explicit content online, when the time is appropriate.
- **Continue the conversation:**
 - Keep communicating with your child with regular check-ins and encourage them to share their feelings and concerns. Constant support is crucial during the recovery process.

Building Trust in a Safe Space

Protecting our children from sextortion and other online risks is a collective responsibility. By providing a supportive environment, you can help children navigate the digital world more confidently and safely.

- **Encourage open communication:**
 - Let your child know they can talk to you about anything, especially their online experiences. Be non-judgmental and patient, and assure them that no topic is off-limits, including challenges they face online.
- **Be non-judgmental:**
 - Make it clear that you're there to listen and help, not to judge or criticize. If they come to you with a problem, react calmly and empathetically.
- **Show empathy:**
 - Try to put yourself in their shoes and validate their feelings. Statements like, "That sounds really tough," or "I can see why you're upset," can make them feel understood.

- **Assure confidentiality:**
 - Unless they are in danger, assure them that the conversations you have will remain confidential. This builds trust and makes them more likely to open up to you.
- **Provide guidance, not solutions:**
 - Instead of telling them what to do, which can often make the child feel like you're not listening to them, guide them towards finding their own solutions. This empowers them and helps them build their problem-solving skills.
- **Follow up:**
 - After your conversation, be sure to check in on them regularly. This shows that you care about their experiences and ongoing well-being. It also shows how well you listened and that their issues matter to you.
- **Keep up-to-date and stay informed:**
 - Check in on the latest trends and potential online threats. This can help you provide relevant advice and shows the child that you understand their digital world.



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408 Galisteo Street Villagra Building Santa Fe, NM 87501
505-490-4060