



Violent online groups

Exploiting children and youth

Violent online groups are targeting and manipulating vulnerable children and youth across widely accessible online platforms to participate in acts of violence, including but not limited to, self-harm, torturing and killing animals, and producing child sexual exploitation material. There are multiple groups, associations and evolving subgroups that make up the online network known as “The Com” – short for community. “The Com” is a virtual community of groups and individuals who conduct illicit activities that glorify serious violence, cruelty, and gore. Elements of “The Com” network are known to have extreme ideological views and are victimizing children through desensitizing and radicalizing them to violence.

Why are they a concern?

“The Com” network deliberately targets, victimizes and recruits vulnerable children and youth between the ages of 8 and 17 years old. Members of “The Com” are threatening, harassing, extorting, coercing and encouraging vulnerable persons and youth to: engage in explicit acts or sexually exploit others; harm or kill family pets or other animals; perform self-harm; attempt or complete suicide; or conduct other acts of serious violence. Vulnerable persons include children or youth who struggle with mental health issues such as depression. Predators are victimizing children or youth for many reasons including: building up their online notoriety “clout chasing”; furthering ideological motivations and degrading society; recruiting; vetting/initiating and radicalizing others; and desensitizing children and youth in preparation for further violence.

Where and how they operate?

These groups operate virtually in very accessible online spaces such as social media platforms, applications (apps) and online games (e.g., Discord, Telegram, Roblox, Minecraft, Twitch, Steam, etc.).

Predators use grooming processes that can include establishing trusting or romantic relationships; or using power or coercive tactics to get victims to engage in serious violence, self harm, or gore activities. This almost always escalates over time, but can also increase rapidly. The predator influences the child or youth into conducting acts that increasingly shame, incriminate, or isolate them, making them vulnerable to further exploitation. These acts can include recording or photographing themselves, siblings or others:

- in sexually explicit poses
- committing sexual acts or sexually exploiting others
- harming or killing animals, including family pets
- harming others or self-harming
- attempting or dying by suicide
- committing other acts of violence

↳ Victims have also been pressured to perform:

- **Cut signs:** names/online handle(s) of group members carved into a victim's skin and/or pets/animals
- **Fan signs:** names written on notes or pieces of paper placed beside items (e.g., dead animals, cut wounds, etc.)
- **Blood signs:** names written in blood, often on the floor, a note, skin, or a wall



As victims provide photos and videos to their predators, they are shared within “The Com” network, further shaming the victim and creating content for the group. Most importantly, predators do so with the objective of gaining notoriety within “The Com” network as these instances of victimization are seen as a success and a “claim to fame”. This process can leave the victim feeling that it would be almost impossible to stop or escape.

Predatory tactics

Some tactics employed by members within “The Com” network include:

- ▶ Threats to publicly post and/or share the explicit or violent content with the victim's family/friends
- ▶ Maliciously obtaining and publishing the victim's personally identifiable information on the internet (doxing)
- ▶ Making a false report of an incident to law enforcement so emergency services are dispatched to a victim's home or school (swatting), demonstrating power while further isolating and threatening the victim
- ▶ Threatening to report the victim's activities to law enforcement or their school to get them in trouble
- ▶ Directly or indirectly threatening the security and wellbeing of the victim, family members/associates

Warning signs and reporting

Key indicators that your child could be the target of members of “The Com” network include:

- They are on mobile apps like Discord, Telegram or other encrypted communications platforms for which you have no visibility as a parent
- Family pets or other animals are being harmed or die suspiciously
- You notice a family pet is uncharacteristically avoiding or fearful of your child or you
- They are demonstrating an interest or affinity to extreme messaging online, including conspiracy theories, anti-government rhetoric, or sympathy/support toward extreme messaging or online propaganda
- They are demonstrating a newfound and abrupt interest in questioning or rejecting moral constraints on their behaviour, together with an interest in Nazism, school shootings, serial killers, or occultism
- Writing in blood or what appears to be blood
- They have a new online “friend” or network they seem infatuated with and/or scared of
- They are receiving anonymous gifts: items delivered to your home, currency, gaming currency or other virtual items



- They are covering their skin in unusual ways
- They are going through more bandages, or showing evidence of cuts, carvings on their skin, stab wounds and more
- They are more quiet than usual and uncharacteristically withdrawn
- They are excessively moody and on edge
- Their grades are dropping
- They are spending more time on the internet, unsupervised or alone in their room
- They are spending more money online or asking for money more often than usual
- They are scrawling names and/or numbers in notebooks, diaries, loose papers

These indicators alone may not appear to be significant, however when considering them in clusters or with the totality of circumstances, they could have more meaning and reason for concern.

Parents, guardians, and other adults should remain mindful these are indicators that a child or youth is being targeted. It is critical that parents and caregivers maintain open communication with their children about healthy online relationships, monitor their online activities, promote online safety, and familiarize themselves with all apps and technology their children and youth are using. Maintaining and fostering an open dialogue with your children will empower them to approach you in the event they are being victimized.

Do not judge, but rather approach the situation with support and understanding.

When considering whether or not to report any suspicions to police, remember:

Your report could be the missing piece that prevents life altering consequences for a child or youth.

If you believe someone is in immediate danger, please call 9-1-1

Resources

- [Take It down](#)
- [Kids Help Phone](#)
- [Need Help Now](#)
- [Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#)
- ↳ [Cyber Tip](#)
- ↳ [Project Arachnid](#)

References

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