

THE  
*R.A.I.S.E.*  
P R O J E C T

Real Action Inspiring Self Empowerment

by  
TAARA

Middle School



[www.taara.org](http://www.taara.org)

**Hotline Number: National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888**

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## Middle School Program

At TAARA, we provide in-school programs designed to support students through the collaborative efforts of our staff, counselors, and educators.

Our programs are built around engaging, interactive methods such as discussions, videos, and role-playing to help students navigate and understand complex scenarios.

We empower students by fostering critical thinking and decision-making skills, giving them the tools they need to make informed and safe choices.

Additionally, we equip educators with practical resources to identify warning signs of trafficking, effectively support vulnerable students, and build safe learning environments.

Our middle school curriculum is designed for young learners; however, we recognize that every child matures at their own pace. We encourage you to preview the content and determine the best fit for your child—some students may benefit from our elementary school or high school curriculum instead.

Our program extends to families by providing parents and guardians with resources and training to complement the school-based curriculum, creating a unified approach to student safety and well-being.

Recognizing the diverse needs of school communities, our programs are available in English, Spanish, and Hindi. If needed, we can translate materials into additional languages, ensuring accessibility for all teachers, counselors, and guardians.

Together, we can create a safe, informed, and supportive environment for students and the communities that care for them.

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# Guide to Thriving in Middle School: Building Resilience in a Digital World

## Introduction: Why This Guide is for You

Hey there! Middle school is an exciting time. You're discovering new things about yourself, making friends, and exploring the world—including the digital one. But let's be real: social media and the internet can feel like a double-edged sword. While it's great for connecting and sharing, it can also leave you feeling overwhelmed, judged, or even unsafe.

This guide is here to help. It's not about telling you to quit social media (we know that's unrealistic!)—it's about giving you the tools to enjoy it while staying safe, confident, and true to yourself. Whether it's handling peer pressure, spotting online red flags, or boosting your self-esteem, we've got you covered. Ready to dive in?

## National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888





# Core Topics of Discussion

## Digital Footprints: What You Post Stays Online

Think About Your Best Friend...

If someone asked you to describe your best friend, you'd probably think of all the fun times you've had, the inside jokes, the things they say, and how they act.

Those memories shape how you see them, right?

Now, flip it—how do you want to be remembered by your friends and family?  
Not just now, but in the future too.

The way you act and the choices you make—both online and in real life—shape how people see you. So, take a second to think before you post and make sure it's something that represents you the right way.

### Why It Matters

Right now, it might just seem like social media is for fun, but what you post today can affect your future.

High schools, sports teams, summer programs, and even colleges check online profiles to see what kind of person you are. And it's not just about the future—your classmates, teachers, and even strangers can form opinions about you based on what you put out there.

So before you post, think: Is this how I want people to remember me? Because just like your best friend's personality is built from little moments, your digital footprint is built from everything you share.

### Recent News Example:

A 2023 survey by Kaplan showed that 40% of high school admissions counselors now check applicants' social media accounts during the admissions process. For middle schoolers, this could mean that what you post now might be seen by schools or programs you're applying to in just a few years.

### Supporting Statistics:

- 36% of college admissions officers check social media profiles to learn more about applicants. (Kaplan Test Prep, 2019)
- 54% of teens worry about how their posts might affect their future. (Pew Research Center, 2022)
- 45% of teens regret something they've posted online. (Common Sense Media, 2021)





**Tool:** Digital Cleanup Checklist Take control of your online presence and make your digital footprint work for you:

**1. Review Privacy Settings:** Set your social media accounts to private so you control who sees your posts.

**2. Delete Problematic Content:** Remove posts, comments, or photos that could be seen as rude, offensive, or inappropriate.

**3. Search Yourself:** Google your name and see what comes up. If you find something embarrassing, delete it (if possible) or ask for help from an adult.

**4. Post Positively:** Share posts that highlight hobbies, achievements, or things that make you proud.

**Reflection Activity: Ask yourself:**

- "What would I think about this post a year from now?"
- "Would I feel proud if my teacher, coach, or family saw this?"
- "Does this post show who I really am in a good way?"

**• What Adds to Your Digital Footprint?**

- Social Media Posts (photos, comments, and likes)
- Videos (even the ones you've deleted)
- Tags in Other People's Posts
- Online Gaming Interactions and Chats
- Apps That Track Data (like fitness or gaming apps)

**• Where It Can Be Seen:**

- By friends, classmates, or future schools
- By public audiences if accounts aren't private
- By hackers or scammers who misuse public info

**Final Thought:**

Your digital footprint is like a digital diary that others can read. It's okay to have fun and share your life online, but think of it like decorating your locker—make it something you're proud for others to see! Remember, your future self will thank you for the decisions you make today.





# Core Topics of Discussion

## Peer Pressure and Social Media Challenges

### Why It Matters: The Invisible Crowd Effect

Imagine walking into a giant stadium. The lights are blinding, the crowd is massive, and all eyes are on you. Now, picture this: every time you post, comment, or join a viral trend online, it's like stepping onto that stage.

Even if it feels like you're just goofing around with friends, your digital actions are seen by way more people than you think—including schools, coaches, future bosses, and even strangers.

But here's the twist—social media isn't just a stadium. It's a stadium with no exit. What you do online stays there, even after you've moved on.

That's why trends like the "Door-Kicking Challenge" on TikTok can be dangerous. In the moment, it might feel like just another funny stunt, but broken property, legal trouble, or injuries aren't worth the "likes."

And it's not just challenges—certain types of posts, like provocative dances or revealing pictures, can attract the wrong kind of attention. Unfortunately, not everyone online has good intentions, and posting certain content can invite unwanted messages or even put you at risk of being targeted by predators. What feels like just a fun trend can end up making you vulnerable in ways you never expected.

So, before you hit "post," ask yourself:

Would I be proud of this if my family, teachers, or future self saw it?

Am I doing this because I want to—or just because everyone else is?

If this post was the ONLY thing someone knew about me, what would they think?

### Ask yourself:

- "How do I decide whether a trend is safe or worth following?"
- "What's one example of a time I said no to peer pressure? How did it feel?"



Your online actions create your reputation.  
Make sure it's one you're proud of—both now and in the future.

**Recent News Example:**

The “Door-Kicking Challenge” on TikTok caused significant damage to people’s homes, leading to arrests of teens who participated. What started as a “funny trend” quickly escalated into serious legal and financial consequences for the teens and their families.

**Supporting Statistics:**

- **FOMO (Fear of Missing Out):** 56% of teens report feeling anxious about missing out if they don’t participate in viral trends or challenges. (Pew Research Center, 2022)
- **Regret:** 45% of teens say they’ve done something online they regret because of peer pressure. (Common Sense Media, 2021)
- **Injuries from Trends:** A 2022 report found that over 20% of viral social media challenges resulted in physical harm to participants. (Journal of Adolescent Health)









## What You Can Do:

### If you're being cyberbullied

- Don't fight fire with fire. Responding can make it worse. Block, report, and talk to someone you trust.
- Save proof. Screenshots can help if you need to report it later.
- You don't have to go through this alone. Tell a parent, teacher, or counselor—they want to help.

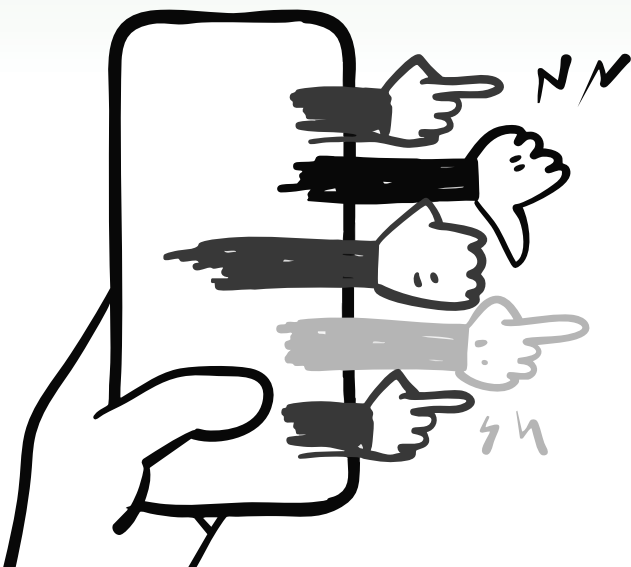
### If you see cyberbullying happening:

- Don't be part of the problem. Liking or sharing hurtful posts adds fuel to the fire.
- Be the one who puts it out. Stand up for the person being targeted, even if it's just sending them a kind message.
- Remember that people make mistakes. Nobody is perfect, and one bad moment shouldn't define someone forever.

Words online have power. Make sure yours build people up, not tear them down.

### Supporting Statistics:

- Frequency: 59% of teens have experienced some form of cyberbullying. (Pew Research Center, 2022)
- Reporting: Only 1 in 10 victims will inform a parent or trusted adult about the abuse. (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2021)
- Impact: Teens who are cyberbullied are twice as likely to experience depression and anxiety. (National Institutes of Health, 2022)





## Why It Matters: The Digital Puzzle Effect

Imagine every time you post online—whether it’s a selfie, a favorite place, or even a casual “At the mall with my bestie!”—you’re dropping a tiny puzzle piece into the world. One piece by itself doesn’t say much. But when enough pieces come together, they start to reveal the full picture of YOU.

**Here’s the catch: You’re not the only one putting the puzzle together.**

Big tech companies use your data to figure out what you like, what you watch, and even where you go—so they can sell you things.

- Hackers and scammers look for clues to guess passwords or steal accounts.
- Strangers can piece together enough details to find out way more about you than you ever intended.

The more pieces you drop—like your location, school, habits, or even a simple “vacation time!” post—the easier it is for someone to track or trick you. And once those pieces are out there, you can’t take them back.

### How to Stay in Control of Your Digital Puzzle

- Think before you post. Ask yourself: Could this give away too much? Would I be okay if a total stranger saw this?
- Check your privacy settings. Lock down your accounts so only people you trust can see your posts.
- Avoid sharing personal details. That includes your full name, address, school, and even routine check-ins.
- Watch out for sketchy links. Scammers use fake messages to steal your passwords—don’t fall for it.

Your personal info is like a puzzle—keep the most important pieces to yourself.

### Supporting Statistics:

- Data Collection: 85% of apps used by teens share user data with third parties. (Common Sense Media, 2022)
- Password Security: 67% of teens reuse the same password across multiple accounts. (Pew Research Center, 2022)
- Awareness: Only 30% of teens know how to set up two-factor authentication. (CyberSafe Kids, 2021)



## Tool: Privacy Protection Checklist

Here's how you can protect your personal data:

1. **Never Overshare:** Don't post your address, school, or phone number online.
2. **Use Strong Passwords:** Create unique passwords for each account and change them regularly.
3. **Enable Two-Factor Authentication:** This adds an extra layer of security to your accounts.
4. **Be Careful with Links:** Avoid clicking on suspicious links in emails, messages, or games.
5. **Check App Permissions:** Make sure apps aren't asking for unnecessary access, like your contacts or location.

### Reflection Activity:

#### Ask yourself:

- "What's one thing you could change about how you share personal info online?"
- "How do you decide which apps to download or trust?"
- "What's one step you could take to improve your account security?"





## Why It Matters: The Broken Scoreboard Effect

Imagine you're playing your favorite game—whether it's basketball, a video game, or even a school competition. You're giving it your all, but there's one problem: the scoreboard is broken.

- Sometimes, it adds extra points for no reason.
- Other times, it takes away points even when you're winning.
- And worst of all, it lets other people decide your score.

Would you trust that scoreboard to tell you how good you are? Of course not! But that's exactly what happens when we base our self-worth on likes, comments, and followers. Social media isn't an accurate scoreboard—it's controlled by algorithms, trends, and even random chance.

The truth is, your value isn't something that can be measured by a broken system.

- Flawless selfies? Filters and editing.
- Luxury vacations? Many influencers fake or borrow things just for the camera.
- Popular posts? The algorithm decides what gets seen, not who's actually important.

Yet, when you compare yourself to these things, it can feel like you're "losing" in a game that was rigged from the start. But here's the truth: Real confidence comes from things that can't be counted—like your kindness, creativity, and strength.

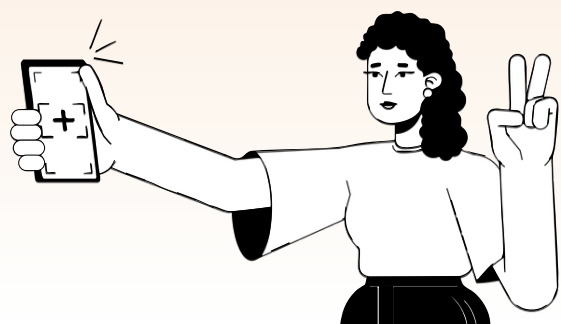
### How to Stop Playing the Broken Game

- **Recognize the illusion.** Social media only shows highlight reels, not real life.
- **Choose your connections** What makes you awesome isn't a number—it's your skills, personality and values.
- **Take a timeout.** The less you rely on social media for validation, the more you'll see your real worth.
- **Choose real connections.** Friends who support you offline are worth way more than on line followers.

Don't let a broken scoreboard define you. You're already winning—just by being YOU.

### Recent News Example:

Research from the University of Rochester highlights that teens who receive fewer likes on social media report higher levels of anxiety and depression. Social media platforms, filled with filtered photos and staged perfection, often create pressure to compare your real life to someone else's curated highlight reel.





## Supporting Statistics:

- **Social Media Anxiety:** 35% of teens say they feel anxious if their posts don't get enough likes. (Pew Research Center, 2022)
- **Fake Perfection:** 50% of teens feel like influencers make their lives seem better than they are. (Common Sense Media, 2021)
- **Comparison:** 59% of teens admit they compare themselves to others on social media. (Pew Research Center, 2021)
- **Self-Esteem Issues:** Teens who spend more than 3 hours a day on social media are twice as likely to report feelings of sadness or hopelessness. (Journal of Adolescent Health, 2022)

## Tool: Self-Worth Journal

Here's how you can start focusing on what makes you amazing:

1. **Daily Wins:** Write down three things you're proud of every day, like helping a friend, finishing homework, or trying something new.
2. **Celebrate Offline Achievements:** Reward yourself for accomplishments that aren't tied to social media, like improving in sports or learning a new skill.
3. **List Your Talents:** Make a list of your unique qualities and talents that have nothing to do with online likes or followers.
4. **Practice Gratitude:** Each night, write down one thing you're grateful for in your life. This helps shift focus away from online comparisons.

## Reflection Activity:

### Ask yourself:

- "What do you love about yourself that has nothing to do with social media?"
- "When was the last time you felt really proud of yourself? What happened?"
- "How can you support friends who are struggling with comparing themselves online?"

## Final Thought:

Remember, what you see on social media isn't always real. Filters, borrowed clothes, and fake travels are part of a performance, not reality. Your worth doesn't come from likes, comments, or followers—it comes from who you are offline. Focus on celebrating your unique qualities and accomplishments, and you'll find that you're more than enough just as you are.







## Why It Matters: The Open-Diary Effect

Imagine you have a personal diary where you write everything—your thoughts, your crush, embarrassing moments, and secrets meant just for you. Now, picture leaving that diary wide open in the middle of the school hallway.

Would you want just anyone flipping through it? Probably not.

But that's exactly what happens when you share too much personal information online.

- Your location? It's like telling strangers exactly where to find you.
- Your passwords? That's handing someone the key to your accounts.
- Private messages? What you send to one person can be screenshot and shared with everyone.

Not all secrets are bad—some are fun, like planning a surprise party or picking out a gift for a friend. But in the digital world, some secrets can put you at risk. Hackers can steal your files, classmates can spread rumors, and people you thought you trusted can misuse what you've shared.

### How to Keep Your Digital Diary Locked

- Don't overshare. Even small details—like posting "Home alone!" or tagging your location—can be risky.
- Use strong passwords & keep them private. No, your pet's name isn't a good password. And no, your best friend doesn't need to know it.
- Think before you send. If you wouldn't want your message, photo, or video shown to the whole school, don't send it.
- Set digital boundaries. Not everyone online is your friend. Keep your personal life private. Your privacy is like your diary—protect it, lock it, and only share what you truly trust.

### Recent News Example:

The Associated Press recently reported how ransomware criminals hacked into schools and leaked students' private files online. These files sometimes included sensitive information like medical records, grades, and family details. This incident shows how dangerous it can be when personal information falls into the wrong hands.

### Supporting Statistics:

- Over-Sharing: 60% of teens say they've shared personal details like their location, full name, or phone number online. (Pew Research Center, 2021)
- Passwords: Only 25% of teens use unique passwords for all their accounts, leaving many vulnerable to hacks. (CyberSafe Kids, 2022)
- Hacks in Schools: Over 1,000 U.S. schools were hit by ransomware attacks in 2022, with student data leaked in more than 30% of cases. (Associated Press, 2023)





### Tool: Boundaries Checklist

Here's how to keep yourself safe while navigating digital spaces and relationships:

- 1. Learn to Say "No":** If someone asks you to share personal details like your address, passwords, or embarrassing photos, it's okay to say, "No, I'm not comfortable with that."
- 2. Spot Red Flags:** If someone online is asking for too much information or being overly pushy and offering gifts, they are all red flags, tell an adult or teacher right away.
- 3. Create Strong Passwords:** Use a mix of letters, numbers, and symbols, and never reuse the same password for multiple accounts.
- 4. Keep Secrets Safe:** Only share secrets that are positive or harmless—like surprises for a friend. If someone asks you to keep a secret that makes you uncomfortable, talk to a trusted adult.

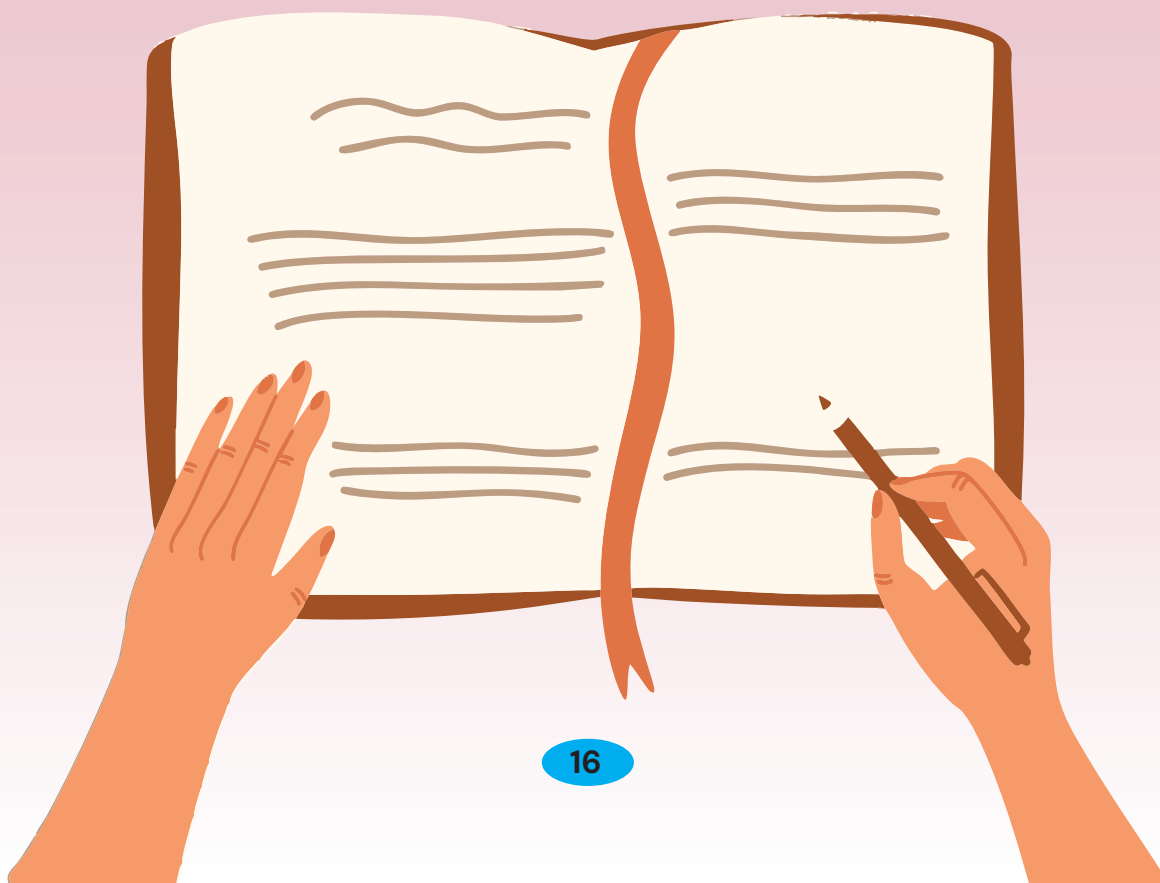
### Reflection Activity:

#### Ask yourself:

- "What's one situation where you felt unsure about keeping a secret? What did you do?"
- "How do you decide what personal information is okay to share?"
- "Who do you trust to talk to if someone makes you feel uncomfortable about sharing information?"

### Final Thought:

Secrets and boundaries are important, both online and offline. While it's okay to keep some secrets—like a surprise party—it's never okay to keep secrets that make you feel scared, pressured, or unsafe. Knowing when to say "no" and how to protect your personal information helps you stay in control and avoid potential risks.





## Managing Stress and Overwhelming Feelings

Recent News Example: The American Psychological Association found that teens spend an average of five hours daily on social media, contributing to stress and poor mental health.

### Tool: Digital Detox Plan

- Set screen time limits using apps like "Forest" or "Offtime."
- Schedule at least one tech-free hour every day.
- Spend time outdoors or on hobbies you enjoy.

Question: "What's your favorite way to relax offline?"





## Online Enticement & Grooming: How to Recognize the Signs

### Think About a Secret Friend...

Imagine you have a friend who always says exactly what you want to hear. They like all your posts, laugh at your jokes, and make you feel understood. They might even send you gifts or say they care about you more than your real friends do. Sounds nice, right? But what if they start asking for secrets in return? Or tell you not to talk to anyone else about your friendship?

This is how online predators work—they gain your trust before asking for something they shouldn't. Grooming happens step by step, making it harder to spot until it's too late. The good news? You can learn how to recognize it before it even starts.

### Why It Matters

Online predators don't always look like villains in movies. They could be anyone—pretending to be your age, liking your posts, or messaging you on apps and games. Many traffickers and abusers don't take what they want by force—they manipulate, pressure, and trick kids into giving it to them.

When teens are aware of these tactics, they are much harder to exploit.

### Recent News Example:

A 2023 report by Thorn found that 1 in 3 minors had been messaged by a stranger asking for inappropriate pictures. Some of these messages came from people pretending to be other teens on social media or gaming platforms.

### Supporting Statistics:

- 40% of teens say they've been contacted online by a stranger in a way that made them uncomfortable. (Thorn, 2022)
- 58% of cases involving online enticement happen on social media. (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2023)
- 90% of kids targeted online are approached by someone pretending to be a friend. (CyberTipline, 2023)



### Tool: The “Trust Test” for Online Friendships

Use these three questions to check if someone online is safe:

- Do they ask me to keep our conversations a secret? Red flag! Safe friends don’t make you hide things.
- Do they ask for photos, videos, or personal information? Red flag! No one should pressure you for private content.
- Do they get upset or guilt-trip me if I don’t respond quickly? Red flag! Safe people respect boundaries.

### What to Do if You’re Being Groomed

- Stop talking to them immediately.
- Block and report the account.
- Tell a trusted adult—a parent, teacher, or school counselor.
- Use a reporting tool like CyberTipline (USA)

### Final Thought:

**Real friends don’t pressure, trick, or make you feel uneasy.** If someone makes you uncomfortable—even just a little—**trust your gut** and get help.





## Gaming & Exploitation: When Fun Becomes Dangerous

### Think About Your Favorite Game...

You just leveled up. You're in an intense battle, working with a teammate you met online. They seem cool—maybe even better than your real-life friends. But then, they ask you for something in return. It starts small—"Send me your real name so I can add you." Then, "Let's Face-Time."

Next thing you know, they're asking for pictures. And suddenly, the game isn't fun anymore. This is how some predators use online gaming to exploit kids.

### Why It Matters

Predators don't just target kids on social media—they hang out in chat features in gaming apps. Traffickers and scammers have been known to:

- Pretend to be teens to gain trust
- Offer "cheat codes" or gifts in exchange for personal information
- Coax kids into private chats (Discord, Snapchat, or WhatsApp)
- Trick kids into sharing photos or meeting up in real life

### Recent News Example:

In 2023, an FBI investigation found that traffickers were using Roblox, Fortnite, and Discord to target kids, offering them virtual currency in exchange for inappropriate images.

### Supporting Statistics:

- 60% of kids say they have talked to a stranger while gaming. (Thorn, 2022)
- 1 in 4 gaming teens has been asked for personal information by someone online. (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2023)
- 72% of teens report playing games with people they've never met in real life. (Pew Research, 2022)

### Tool: Gaming Safety Checklist

- Keep private info private. Don't share real names, addresses, or photos.
- Turn off chat with strangers. Play with real-life friends only.
- Never accept gifts or money from someone online.
- Tell a trusted adult if someone makes you uncomfortable.

### Final Thought:

Gaming should be **fun, not risky**. If someone online makes you feel pressured, **quit the game and talk to an adult**. Your safety is worth more than any win.





# Sextortion & Deepfake Blackmail: What You Need to Know

## Think About a Screenshot...

Imagine if someone took a private moment—something embarrassing, or even fake—and threatened to share it. “Send me more or I’ll post this.” That’s how sextortion works. And now, with deepfake technology, even fake videos can be used to blackmail teens.

## Why It Matters

Sextortion is when someone threatens to share private images unless you send more or give them money. Predators use AI to create fake videos and blackmail teens into doing things they wouldn’t normally do.

## Supporting Statistics:

- 79% of sextortion victims are boys. (FBI, 2023)
- 75% of victims didn’t tell anyone until it was too late. (CyberTipline, 2023)
- Deepfake blackmail increased by 350% in 2023 alone. (TechShield Report, 2023)

## Tool: The 3-STEP EXIT Plan

- **Stop Talking.** Block and report the account.
- **Save Everything.** Screenshots can be used as proof.
- **Tell an Adult.** Sextortion thrives in silence—don’t try to handle it alone.

## Final Thought:

If someone threatens to expose you, you are not alone. It’s a crime, and there are people who will help. Report it, don’t pay, and don’t send more.





## Unhealthy Relationships: Recognizing Emotional Manipulation

### Think About a Friendship Test...

Imagine if your best friend told you, "If you really cared about me, you'd tell me your biggest secret." Or if someone you liked said, "If you don't text me back right away, I guess you don't love me."

At first, it might sound like they just care a lot. But real relationships—whether friendships, dating, or family—don't rely on guilt, control, or fear. Emotional manipulation is when someone makes you feel responsible for their happiness—or uses your feelings to control you.

### Why It Matters

Manipulative relationships don't always start with obvious red flags. They often begin with flattery, attention, and trust-building. Over time, they can lead to control, isolation, and even exploitation. Knowing the signs early on can help you set boundaries and protect yourself.

### Recent News Example:

A 2023 study found that 1 in 3 teens has experienced some form of emotional manipulation in friendships or dating relationships.

### Supporting Statistics:

- 70% of teens who have been emotionally manipulated didn't realize it at first. (Love is Respect, 2023)
- 1 in 10 high schoolers has experienced digital abuse from a dating partner. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2022)

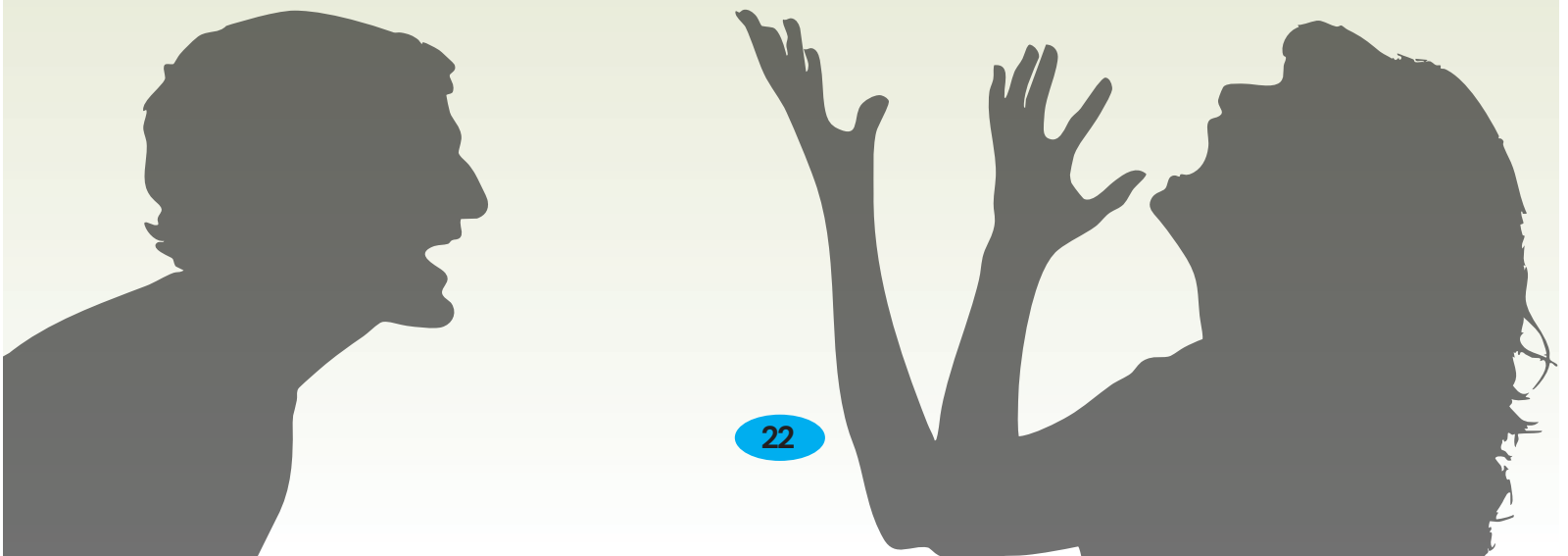
### Tool: The Relationship Red Flag Test

If you hear these phrases, take a step back:

- "If you really loved me, you would..." (Love is not a test.)
- "Don't tell anyone about this." (Secrets = red flag.)
- "I'll hurt myself if you leave." (You are not responsible for someone else's actions.)

### Final Thought:

Real love and friendship don't make you feel scared, guilty, or trapped. If someone is pressuring you, trust your gut, set boundaries, and reach out for help.





# Body Autonomy & Safe Boundaries: It's Okay to Say No

## Think About Your Personal Space...

Imagine someone keeps standing too close to you, touching your hair, or tickling you—even after you told them to stop. It might not seem like a big deal at first, but **if it makes you uncomfortable, it matters.**

Your body **belongs to you**—and **you have the right to say NO** to anything that doesn't feel right.

## Why It Matters

Knowing how to set boundaries helps you:

- Feel safe in everyday interactions
- Say “no” to uncomfortable situations
- Speak up when something feels wrong

## Recent News Example:

A 2023 survey found that **60% of kids ages 10–14** didn't feel comfortable saying “no” in situations that made them uncomfortable—especially if the other person was older.

## Supporting Statistics:

- Over 80% of kids who set clear boundaries feel more confident standing up for themselves. (Stop It Now, 2022)
- 90% of abuse cases involve someone the child already knows. (Darkness to Light, 2023)

## Tool: The STOP Method

- **Speak up:** Say “I don't like that.”
- **Take a step back:** Move away.
- **Open up:** Tell a trusted adult.
- **Protect yourself:** Know your rights.

## Final Thought:

You don't need a “good reason” to say no. If it makes you uncomfortable, that's reason enough.





## Exploitation Awareness: Myths vs. Reality

### What is Exploitation?

Exploitation is when someone tricks, forces, or manipulates a person into doing work or activities they don't want to do, often in dangerous or harmful situations. Traffickers might use lies, threats, or even gifts to gain control over their victims. It can happen to anyone, anywhere—even online. That's why it's important to know the signs, trust your instincts, and talk to a safe adult if something doesn't feel right.

### Think About a Kidnapping Scene...

You might imagine someone getting snatched off the street, thrown into a van, and disappearing. But here's the truth—most trafficking doesn't happen that way.

Traffickers don't always use force—they use lies, manipulation, and promises to trap victims. And it doesn't just happen in far-away places—it happens in communities just like yours.

### Why It Matters

Knowing how real trafficking happens helps you:

- Recognize the warning signs
- Protect yourself and your friends
- Speak up if something seems off

### Myth vs. Reality:

Myth: Trafficking only happens in other countries.

Reality: It happens in every U.S. state and most cities.

Myth: Only girls are trafficked.

Reality: Boys and nonbinary teens are also targeted.

Myth: Traffickers are always strangers.

Reality: Most traffickers are people the victim already knows—a friend, online connection, or even family.





### Recent News Example:

A 2023 case in California revealed that a high school coach had trafficked students using fake modeling opportunities.

### Supporting Statistics:

- 83% of trafficked teens were approached by someone they trusted first. (Polaris Project, 2022)
- 55% of online recruitment happens on Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. (Thorn, 2023)

### Tool: The “It’s Too Good to Be True” Test

If someone online offers you:

- Modeling or influencer jobs that pay fast
- Trips, gifts, or money for no reason
- A secret relationship where they control you

**STOP. It could be a scam.**

### Final Thought:

Trafficking doesn’t look like the movies. It looks like a friend, an online connection, or an offer that seems too good to be true. Be aware, trust your instincts, and speak up.

### Your Choices, Your Power—Own It!

Middle school? Yeah, it’s a whole rollercoaster—new friends, drama, awkward moments, and figuring out who you even are. And guess what? The digital world is just another part of that ride. But here’s the thing: you’re in the driver’s seat.

You don’t have to be perfect or quit social media completely. What really matters is knowing you have way more control than you think. Every post, every comment, every DM—it all adds up. It shapes how others see you, but more importantly, how you see yourself.

When you choose to be real, stand up for what’s right, and keep your privacy locked down, you’re not just scrolling—you’re owning your space. Your worth isn’t measured in likes, follows, or some perfectly curated aesthetic. Real power? That’s in being you—authentic, kind, and confident, both online and IRL.



# Teacher's Guide:

## Recognizing and Responding to Silent Signals of Distress

A comprehensive resource to help educators identify and address warning signs of exploitation or emotional distress in middle school students.

### Section 1: Understanding the Silent Signals

Students in trouble may exhibit subtle or overt signs. Use this checklist to monitor behavior:

#### Behavioral Signs:

- Sudden withdrawal from friends or activities.
- Noticeable fearfulness, anxiety, or hypervigilance.
- Unexplained absences or frequent tardiness.
- Sudden Change in Clothing Choices – When teen starts wearing clothing that is overly revealing, inappropriate for their age, or inconsistent with their usual style, especially if it seems influenced by someone new in their life.

#### Physical Indicators:

- Unexplained injuries (bruises, cuts) or appearing unkempt.
- Fatigue or signs of neglect (e.g., consistently dirty clothing).

#### Social Red Flags:

- Excessive secrecy about online activity or new, older friends.
- Mentioning gifts, money, or items that are unusual for their situation.

#### Emotional Signals:

- Low self-esteem, reluctance to make eye contact, or sudden mood swings.
- Over-apologizing or difficulty trusting adults.





## Section 2: What to Do if You Notice Warning Signs

### Step 1: Observe and Document

- Record specific behaviors and patterns.
- Avoid jumping to conclusions but take note of consistent red flags.

### Step 2: Create a Safe Space

- Approach the student privately and with empathy.
- Example: "I've noticed you've been a little quieter lately. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"
- Avoid confrontational language. Use open-ended questions.

### Step 3: Report Concerns

- Follow your school's reporting protocols.
- Share observations with the school counselor or child protection team.

### Step 4: Engage Trusted Adults

- If appropriate, involve parents or guardians, ensuring sensitivity and confidentiality.

## Section 3: Providing Support to Students

Resources for Immediate Support:

- Hotline Numbers: Distribute wallet-sized cards with local helplines (e.g., National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888).
- School Counseling Office: Ensure students know how to access in-school resources.



## Do's and Don'ts:

- **Do: Stay calm**, reassure the child they're not in trouble, and let them know you're there to help.
- **Don't:** Promise confidentiality if the student's safety is at risk.

## Providing Resources:

- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:**  
**1-888-373-7888 or text "HELP" to 233733.**
- Local Child Advocacy Centers: Offer referrals for counseling and legal assistance.
- TAARA Parent Resources: Encourage parents to follow @taara\_us on Instagram for tips, updates, and support.

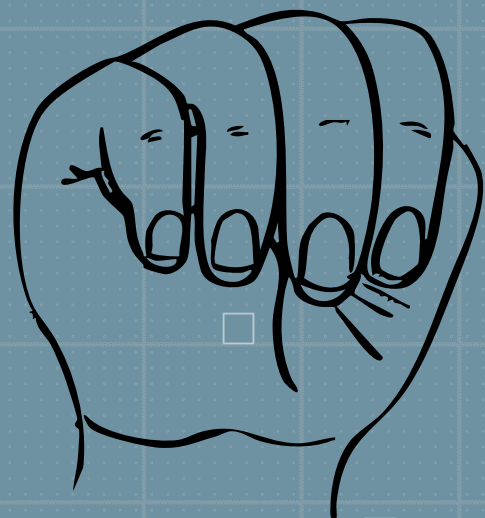
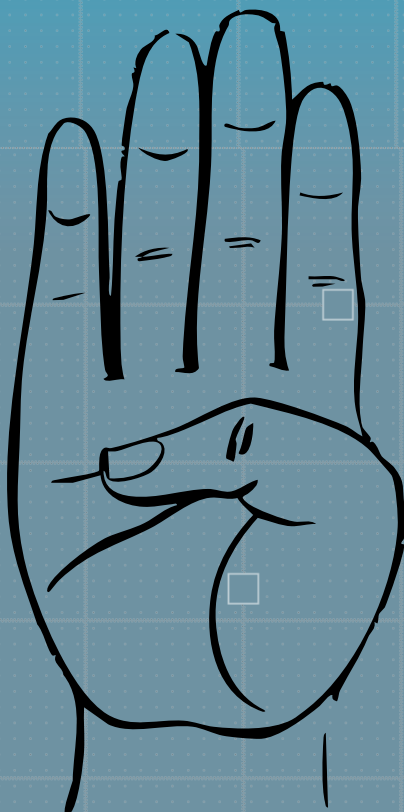
## Encourage Community Collaboration:

- Recommend family counseling services for emotional healing.
- Share information about free workshops or safety training programs in the community.

## International signal for HELP

The signal, which is meant to be made with one hand, sees an individual face their palm outward to the camera or other person before tucking their thumb inwards and closing their remaining fingers on top to make a fist. This is the international signal for Help Me.

Learn It. Watch for It. Show it to Others.





TAARA  
*CARES*

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