

Scary new catfish trend

EXTORTION: TEENS SEND THEIR NAKED PHOTOS



➔ **Multiple queries a week show that the scamming method is rife – and successful.**

Citizen reporter

Children as young as 12 years old, from good moral families, with engaged parents, are being blackmailed and extorted for money online through catfishing. And the problem is immense.

Catfishing is one of the biggest ongoing scams, where any person can create a fake online identity to deceive someone into a relationship.

This person can use someone else's photo, it might be someone the child knows, or it could be an image the catfish found on the internet and invents a false name for, adds personal information, and creates a fake social media profile.

Catfishing has existed for many years and although it is

nothing new, scammers are finding new ways to use catfishing to extort money from teenagers and their families.

This new online scam is targeting kids as young as 12 years old. Teenagers are befriending people online with the assumption that they are the same age group, but they are being catfished.

The Guardian, South Africa's leading child safeguarding company, has seen a drastic increase in the number of teens who are falling prey to this scam.

"We are dealing with between 15 to 20 of these new queries a week, and the number seems to be going up weekly," says Marc Hardwick the managing director of The Guardian.

How does the scam work?

Generally, the catfisher is posing as a teen girl and is chatting to a teen boy who will become the victim. Sometimes even married adult men are scammed.

Over the course of about a week, the "girl" portrays herself as "sexually provocative", but only as much as a teen girl would.

The catfisher is clever enough to still play

Solutions

- ▶ There are steps that schools and parents should take to mitigate these risks because this scam can literally change a child's life.
- ▶ Speak to your child about this scam directly. I definitely think parents should be having conversations with their teens about challenges they may face in general, but this one is escalating quickly.
- ▶ Ask your child's school if they are aware of the scam and inform them. When your child is talking to his friends about these things, and they are agreeing that this is a challenge, it reinforces the message. Basically, if their peers are all aware, then they are more likely to be guarded.
- ▶ Create a time or place in your relationship with your child where they can have "adult conversations" with you: a time where they can ask questions or tell you about what they are doing, and even if their choices are poor, that they won't be in trouble.
- ▶ Knowing about the problems your teen is facing is significantly more important than punishing them for those mistakes.
- ▶ Test them. Get an adult you trust to try catfish them and tell them that you going to do that. There are cases where teens have come to their parents after this conversation to say that a girl had tried to get them to send nudes, and they didn't send them because they thought it was a friend of mom or dad. It wasn't, but at least they made the right choice.

the part of the "shy teen girl" who can be convinced to send inappropriate pics.

As the "relationship" develops over the course of about a week, the "girl" allows the conversations to become a little more "naughty" and that's when they are sucked into this scam.

The catfisher is sufficiently skilled, so as to just tease enough and make promises of sending pics of "herself" if the boy also sends pics of himself.

That may be a pic of his private parts or a video of him naked or him masturbating.

Once the catfisher has this video/picture, he/she then requests money to prevent the video being sent out.

In our experience this can start from as little as R200 because that is generally the type of money that teens can access but the amount becomes more and more.

In a case a child had eventually spent all of his savings before he spoke to his parents.

When the child is unable to pay, either because they don't have the money or have exhausted their funds, they will turn to mom or dad.

The child realises that he has messed up and will probably be in

video going viral.

Mom or Dad may want to report this, as extortion to the police but are stumped by the fact that their child has created child porn, been in possession of child porn and has distributed child porn.

All of which are criminal offences which they would have to report to the police, to explain the extortion.

Now the dilemma. Report the extortion to the police so that the catfisher can be caught and run the risk of your child being arrested? Or pay and hope it all goes away?

Most parents pay and that's where the problem escalates.

Sometimes the catfisher, who now knows who the parents are, may threaten to disseminate this information to the parents' employer, their company website, or clients for more money.

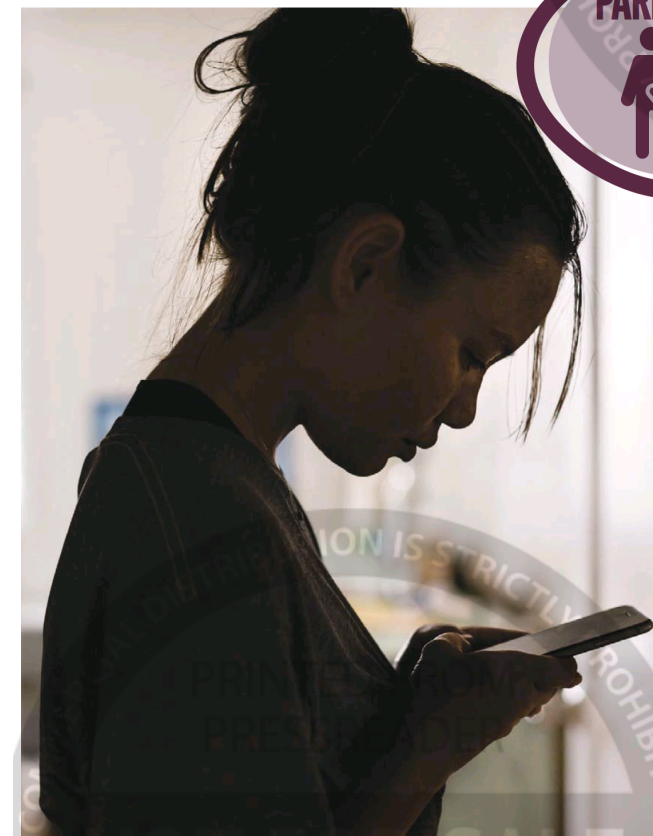
Teenagers are so comfortable living their lives and having relationships online, that they don't always notice red flags, and don't think to question someone's true identity.

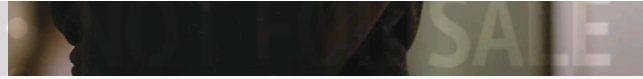
"If someone says they are a 13-year-old girl in their neighborhood, teens tend to believe it, even though it could be a 40-year-old man in the next city.

"Distribution of pornography is illegal, and Catfishers are using this to their advantage.

"According to South African law, once a person has turned 10 years old, they are criminally lia-

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trouble with their parents but in his mind, that is far less than the embarrassment of the picture/

ble," says private investigator and specialist child safeguarding expert Marc Hardwick.