

Virtual Forum

**Guardians of the Digital Playground:
Safeguarding Youth from
Online Exploitation**

April 27, 2026 | 7pm ET

Alfonso Vera Jr., MD

Alfonso Vera Jr., MD, is a second-year Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellow at UC Irvine focused on culturally responsive care for underserved communities. A former U.S. Army Military Policeman, he earned a Sociology degree from UC Riverside, worked with at-risk youth, and is committed to serving Spanish-speaking populations and addressing social determinants of health. He received his medical degree from UC Riverside School of Medicine and completed Psychiatry residency at UC Irvine. Dr. Vera is an APA Foundation Diversity Leadership Fellow and serves on the APA Council on Children, Adolescents, and Their Families. He recently accepted a position providing psychiatric care to justice-involved youth at the Orange County Health Care Agency Clinical Evaluation and Guidance Unit at Juvenile Hall.



Dr. Lavanya Wusirika, MD

Dr. Lavanya Wusirika, MD (“Dr. Lava”) is a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist at Children’s Hospital of Orange County (CHOC), where she provides outpatient and inpatient care at the Mental Health Inpatient Center (MHIC). She earned her MD from the USC Keck School of Medicine, completed psychiatry residency at LAC+USC Medical Center, and fellowship training in child and adolescent psychiatry at UCLA’s Neuropsychiatric Institute. Dr. Wusirika specializes in treating children and adolescents with anxiety, depression, trauma-related disorders, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, mood disorders, OCD, and acute psychiatric crises, with a focus on stabilization and continuity of care. Known for her collaborative, developmentally informed approach, she works closely with multidisciplinary teams to support children and families through complex mental health needs.



Liam Doyle, EdD, MBA

Liam Doyle, EdD, MBA is a Supervising Investigator with the Riverside County District Attorney's Child Exploitation Team and countywide Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force, with a distinguished career spanning military service, advanced education, and specialized criminal investigations. A U.S. Navy veteran and former Master-at-Arms, Dr. Doyle has led assignments in gangs, international terrorism, national security, homicide, probation, parole, and child exploitation cases, bringing deep expertise in digital investigations and victim-centered child protection. He also serves as associate faculty in Administration of Justice at Norco College, where he mentors future public safety professionals and shares real-world leadership experience in criminal justice.



Lauren Schooner, MD

Lauren Schooner, MD is a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist with the Orange County Health Care Agency and fellowship-trained at the University of California, Irvine. An Orange County native from Cypress, she earned her undergraduate degree in Neuroscience and Anthropology from UCLA, her medical degree from the USC Keck School of Medicine, and completed her psychiatry residency at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. Dr. Schooner specializes in trauma-informed care for underserved youth, with focused expertise in child maltreatment, juvenile justice mental health, and human trafficking, currently serving as the treating psychiatrist for the Clinical Evaluation and Guidance Unit (CEGU) at Juvenile Hall. She also collaborates with community anti-trafficking initiatives, serves on the AACAP Child Maltreatment and Violence Committee, and teaches physicians across psychiatry, pediatrics, and family medicine, reflecting her commitment to both vulnerable populations and the next generation of mental health professionals.



Virtual Forum Logistics

- All participants are in listen-only mode
- Technical issues or AACAP-related questions → use the Chat box
- Questions for the presenters → use the Q&A box
 - Due to time limitations, we may not be able to answer all questions, but we will do our best to address as many as possible.
- Today's session will be recorded and posted to www.aacap.org/virtual_forum within the next 24 hours

Curious Case of M.E.

- 15-year-old girl from Los Angeles County here at Children's Hospital Orange County on the pediatrics floor for preseptal cellulitis from eyebrow piercing
- Urine toxicology positive for methamphetamine, benzodiazepines, THC
- RN sees her on Instagram videochatting with an adult male, her "boyfriend"/drug dealer
- Psychiatry and Social work are consulted
- Admitted to inpatient psychiatry for GD (grave disability) as her plan was to live on the streets with her boyfriend, refusing to go home

Curious Case of M.E.

- M.E. is guarded, angry, refuses to meet with doctor or therapist, requires IMs for agitation
- Parents describe her as “oppositional child”, with substance use problems
- M.E. shares:
 - Domestic violence at home
 - Parental substance use
 - Bullying at school
 - Prior sexual abuse
 - Running away

Curious Case of M.E.

- Kidnapped at trucker rest stop 1 year ago, forced to use substances. CPS and PD involved but she refuses interview
- Searches online for kidnapper, makes friends on Yubo (dating site) and Instagram
- Using methamphetamine, crack cocaine and fentanyl in “trap houses”
- M.E. went to East LA to get tattoo, meets female friend “Steph” on Instagram. Steph says she is 16 years old and also a runaway child
- Steph brings M.E to a house that belongs to a man, “B”.
- He keeps her in his home, gives her meth, forces her to have sex with men to get food. “B” advertises M.E. on a shadow Instagram account to pimp her out

Curious Case of M.E.

Main questions to ask:

- What did you do get the drugs? How did you pay for them?
- What social media platform did you use to make these friends?
- How did the friends link you to the trafficker?
- (In a roundabout way) What are the addresses/cross-streets? - “Man, I’m so bad with navigating these cities. How did you know where you were?”
- Does your boyfriend track you? How?

Therapeutic alliance:

- Mixture of awe, reflections of risky nature,
- Minimize disapproval or warnings
- A bit of “trading war stories”
- It was helpful that I knew all the streets and landmarks she referenced
- Careful to save questions about trafficker till all the rapport is developed already

Curious Case of M.E.

Systems Roadblocks:

- Report to LA DCFS
 - Refused report - not a familial abuse situation
 - Refused to cross report to PD. Stated “she can go to a police station”
 - Accepted report for neglect (parents did not file missing persons reports)
- Case physically spanned all LA county, multiple cities. WHO TO CALL?
- Report to Police department where trafficker lives
 - Refused – far distance to come to interview patient
- Called Watch Commander and begged police to come. Rookie officer came, was dismissive until he heard from M.E.
- Arrest made in the next few weeks. And M.E. was sent to out of state residential

Curious Case of M.E.

Difficulties in this case

- Where to make report?
- No institution (CPS/PD/sex crimes) is seeing this case in its entirety. They find it hard to believe a psychiatric patient
- Very guarded patient
- Helping her face shame, betrayal and share what happened to her.
- Methamphetamine cravings - used Naltrexone
- Rule out bipolar (confusing with concurrent meth use)
- Refused Olanzapine or Aripiprazole due to weight gain concerns
- Started Latuda, up to 60mg, effective for anxiety and mood swing

Online Enticement: A Growing Crisis

Online enticement of children is escalating at an alarming rate. NCMEC CyberTipline reports paint a stark picture: **546,333 reports in 2024** — surging to **1.4 million in 2025**, representing a **156% increase in a single year**. In 2024 alone, over 20 million total reports were filed. As these crimes multiply, resources have not kept pace. As child psychiatrists, your clinical insight is a powerful tool — understanding this landscape helps you better protect and support your patients.

Sexual Conversation

Perpetrators engage minors in explicit or grooming-oriented dialogue online

Explicit Image Production

Coercing or manipulating children into producing sexually explicit imagery

In-Person Meeting

Using online contact to arrange physical meetings for sexual purposes

Sextortion

Image-based blackmail — threatening to share explicit images unless demands are met

Online Enticement: A Growing Crisis

When a patient discloses online enticement, your response in the first hours matters enormously. **The first priority is always to protect the child.** The second is to identify the offender to stop ongoing abuse. Ideally, three key pathways should be activated in coordination with one another.

● NCMEC CyberTipline

Contact NCMEC and provide **as many details as possible:** victim information, offender details, platform, usernames, screenshots, and any communication. The depth of your report directly affects the speed and effectiveness of the investigation.

● Local Law Enforcement

Contacting local LE is the **fastest way to establish victim protection and begin evidence collection.** Officers can act immediately, secure devices, and coordinate with partner agencies. Do not delay this step, waiting for other processes.

● Child Protective Services

Most CPS agencies are **not equipped to address grooming or online sexual abuse in isolation.** CPS involvement is most effective when law enforcement is already engaged.

Your patient is not the only person being victimized by the offender. It is common for offenders to victimize several children at once.

The NCMEC CyberTip Investigation Cycle

Provider Report

NCMEC Intake

LEA Investigation

Forward to LEA

What Happens After Your Report

NCMEC's intake specialists review each tip, conduct open-source intelligence (OSINT) gathering, and route the report to the appropriate law enforcement agencies — both in the victim's jurisdiction and, when identified, the suspect's jurisdiction. The more detail you provide, the faster this process moves.

Where Do Online Predators Find Children?

Predators go where children are — and today, that means virtually every connected platform.

Online Games with Chat

Multiplayer games create trust through shared play before private messaging begins.

Social Media Platforms

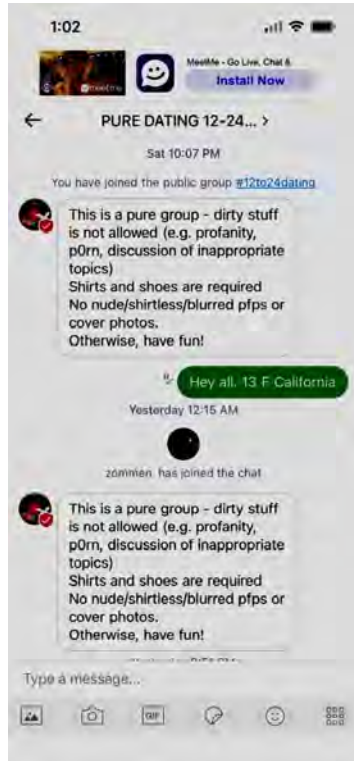
Direct messaging features allow private, unmonitored contact with minors.

Peer-to-Peer Apps

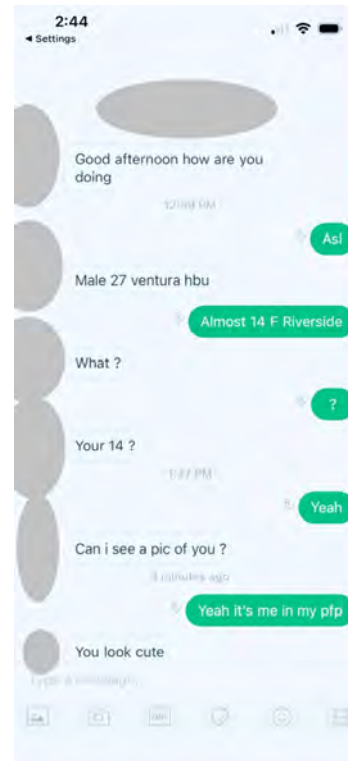
Any app enabling direct communication can become a vector for grooming.

What Does Online Grooming Look Like?

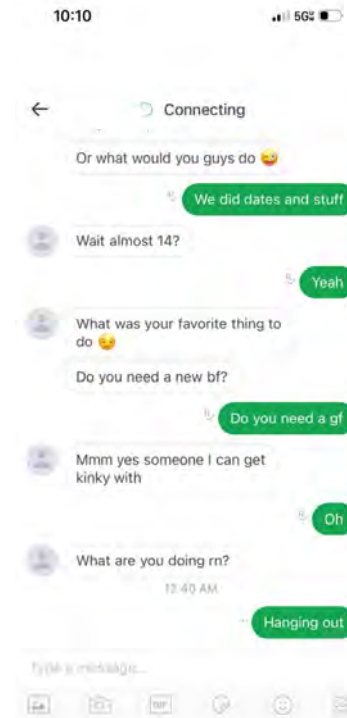
Predators use a calculated, multi-step process to build trust and exploit children online.



Stage 1: Trust Building



Stage 2: Isolation & Manipulation
The child is separated from supports and pushed toward secrecy, dependency, and compliance.



Stage 3: Exploitation & Coercion
The grooming escalates into sexual exploitation, threats, or blackmail to maintain control.

Systems Considerations for Online Child Exploitation

Lauren Schooner, MD

Most children are sold for sex on the internet, not on the streets

- Patricia Davis, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The evidence presented at trial – which included internal Meta documents and testimony from former Meta employees, law enforcement officials, and New Mexico educators – established that Meta’s design features enabled pedophiles and predators to engage in child sexual exploitation on Meta’s platforms. Evidence from those witnesses and other industry experts also demonstrated that Meta intentionally designs its platforms to addict young people and, contrary to Meta’s public commitments, expose them to dangerous content related to eating disorders and self harm.

[New Mexico Department of Justice Wins Landmark Verdict Against Meta
- New Mexico Department of Justice](#)

Roblox lawsuits allege that the company:

- Doesn't require age verification, allowing users to appear younger or older than their actual age
- Enables predators to exploit children through the game's virtual currency system, with some reportedly offering "Robux" in exchange for explicit pictures
- Previously used default settings that made it easy for adults to directly message minors
- Markets Roblox as safe and family-friendly despite allowing young users to simulate sexual acts within the game
- Supports integration with apps like Discord®, making it easier for predators to communicate with children outside of the game

In one case, a 13-year-old girl met a man through Roblox's chat feature. The two later continued talking on Discord, where he groomed her over time. The man eventually traveled to her home and sexually assaulted her.

[Roblox® Sexual Abuse Lawsuit | Sokolove Law](#)

Case Presentation

- Case: 16-year-old female with history of PTSD and foster system involvement presenting to PHP after ED visit for acute suicidality
- Background – primary caregiver is maternal great-aunt who has been caring for the child since she was 3 years old, unknown trauma history before that
 - Great-aunt says that the patient has been more irritable and oppositional the last few weeks, staying out late past curfew and refusing to come home, and stealing money
- Child presented to ED following a 911 call after endorsing SI when upset and in argument with great-aunt

Case Presentation, continued

- Patient is in JROTC and presents as guarded and evasive, says that she is “fine” and that she has had ongoing issues with great-aunt which are exacerbating her ongoing depression and anxiety
- Previously doing well in school, denies allegations of stealing money from great-aunt
 - Says that she didn’t want to go home because it was a friend’s birthday, then was upset when she was in trouble and said she was suicidal out of anger

Case Presentation, continued

- 2 weeks in, the patient came in tearful and disclosed that for the past month she has been targeted by someone who she met on a teen chat, after being convinced to send a topless photo
- Individual then sent a screenshot of patient's Instagram followers and threatened to send photos to entire follower list if money wasn't sent
 - Would block the individual, who would then send 2-4 new messages from new numbers emails, and social media accounts
 - Patient took money from great-aunt to send to extorter, who then demanded more and more money
 - "I should be smarter...I have enough experience to know this was stupid"
- Ended with patient feeling the only way out was suicide

Called CPS to report online sextortion



“Since it is not someone in the home or known to the family, this is a law enforcement report. Please call the local police department.”



Called local PD to report online sextortion



“We do not handle these cases since they cross jurisdictions and state lines. We can take the report, but nothing will come of it. Please call the county’s child protective services and the local FBI office.”



Called local FBI field office to report online sextortion



“This is very limited information; we will take the report. These cases are starting to skyrocket.”

Mandated Reporters

- State-specific laws, but all states have adopted mandated reporting for child psychiatrists
 - Legally enforceable duty for those who have contact with vulnerable populations to report to state and local authorities when mistreatment or abuse of those populations is suspected or confirmed
- Failing to Report – can lead to legal consequences
 - In some jurisdictions, mandated reporters who fail to report can be held liable for damages resulting from their failure to report

If we call our local Child Protective Services or Police Department and they don't take the report, have we done our due diligence as mandated reporters?

Importance of Screening

- Online enticement reports have increased from 292,951 in 2024 to 518,720 in 2025, a 150% increase
- Generative AI-related reports soared from 6,835 to 440,419 – a rise in AI sextortion cases
- Sextortion cases have seen dramatic rises, highlighting the urgent need for increased awareness and prevention efforts to protect children from online sextortion threat

Who do we ask? How do we ask? What do we say?

There currently is no tool or standardized screening measure for online exploitation for any health care professional.

Internet Safety Questions

- Do you often chat or message with strangers you've never met?
- Have you ever given anyone from online your address or phone number?
- Have you ever shared a photo of yourself with someone online who asks for it?
- Has anyone ever asked you to meet in person that you met online?
- Has anyone offered you free gifts or money in exchange for a photo of yourself?

Hopeful Future Mandated Changes for Online Platforms

- Effective age verification
- Removal of predators from the platform
- Protection of minors from encrypted communications that shield bad actors

Team Hope

Team HOPE



[Overview](#)

[Get Support](#)

[Give Support](#)

[Resources](#)

Support

Get Support

Who We Help

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's Team HOPE is here to assist families of missing or exploited children, as well as adult survivors of certain types of sexual abuse, abduction, or other missing cases.

We work specifically with individuals who have been, or have had a child who:

- Was involved in suspected or confirmed child sex trafficking
- Was involved in an abduction or other missing case type (family abduction, run away, non-family abduction, etc.)
- Is a victim of child sexual abuse material (sexually explicit images, videos, etc)
- Has experienced online enticement (was solicited online for sexual images or acts)
- Was sexually abused by a non-family member

How We Help

Our peer-support model pairs you with a volunteer who has experienced a similar situation to yours. Team HOPE's trained volunteers can:

- Help people in crisis with a missing, sexually exploited, or recovered child as they handle the day-to-day issues of coping and/or searching for their child.
- Help provide peer and emotional support, compassion, coping tools and empowerment to people who have or were missing, sexually exploited, and recovered or located children.
- Help instill courage, determination, and hope to those we support.
- Help alleviate the feelings of isolation often resulting from fear and frustration.

All Team HOPE support is phone-based and offered free of charge.

Call 866-305-HOPE (4673) to talk to a Team HOPE member.

[Click to Call Team HOPE](#)

References

- [Mandatory Reporting Laws - StatPearls - NCBI Bookshelf](#)
- [New Mexico Department of Justice Wins Landmark Verdict Against Meta - New Mexico Department of Justice](#)
- [Online Enticement](#)
- [NetSmartz Home](#)
- [Team HOPE](#)
- [Resources and Support - Take It Down](#)
- [takeitdown.ncmec.org](#)
- [Is Your Explicit Content Out There?](#)
- [New Mexico jury says Meta harms children's mental health and safety, violating state law : NPR](#)
- [Spike in online crimes against children a “wake-up call”](#)
- [Roblox® Sexual Abuse Lawsuit | Sokolove Law](#)
- [sextortion_crowdsourcing_enticement_and_coercion_2.pdf](#)

Questions?

Contact Information

Dr. Vera - Alfonv1@hs.uci.edu

Dr. Lava - Lavanya.Wusirika@choc.org

Dr. Doyle - LiamDoyle@rivcoda.org

Dr. Schooner - Lschooner@ochca.com