



April 17, 2020

RE: Online Safety for Children

Dear Commissioner Ricker:

As the United States Attorney for the District of Minnesota and the Special Agent in Charge for the Minneapolis Division of the FBI, one of our highest collective priorities is the protection of children. Young people today are faced with online threats and abuse more now than ever. This was before schools closed as a result of COVID-19. Now, children are likely online even more, potentially being put at greater risk for exploitation. In our new environment, we want to warn parents, educators, caregivers and children about the dangers of online sexual exploitation and signs of child abuse.

As educators, you know that children tend to be trusting online and befriend people they may not know. Predators take advantage of this and target children, often between the ages of 10 and 17, who have a presence on social media. There is no specific profile for victims of this type of crime. Children across all demographics can be targeted. This type of crime causes very real harm and has a lasting impact, especially on young victims. Images and videos do not easily disappear from the Internet. The long term effects can be devastating.

Online sexual exploitation can come in many forms. Throughout Minnesota, we are seeing an increase in online child exploitation and sextortion. Sextortion occurs when an adult coerces a victim into providing sexually explicit images or videos and then threatens to share the images publicly if the victim fails to comply with their demands. In order for the victimization to stop, children typically have to come forward to someone they trust—typically a parent, teacher, caregiver, or member of law enforcement. We encourage you to review the resources regarding child exploitation and other crimes related to COVID-19 at <https://www.fbi.gov/coronavirus>.

Together, we have an aggressive stance toward the investigation and prosecution of COVID-19 related crimes and we will remain proactive in our efforts to build awareness around our concern of child exploitation. But we need your help. We are asking parents,

teachers, and trusted adults to be vigilant. Cases are often the results of tips that come in from a watchful parent who notices something and reports it to law enforcement.

We are hopeful through your contacts, the Minnesota Department of Education can provide this information to schools throughout Minnesota, who in turn can remind parents and caregivers to be extra vigilant during these unprecedented times, and to report any suspected wrongdoing to local law enforcement and/or to the Minneapolis Field Office of the FBI at 763-569-8000 or online at tips.fbi.gov.

Respectfully,

s/ Erica H. MacDonald
ERICA H. MacDONALD
United States Attorney

s/ Rainer S. Drolshagen
RAINER S. DROLSHAGEN
Special Agent in Charge
FBI, Minneapolis Division