

HOW TO SPOT SIGNS OF ONLINE PREDATION

By Aloysious Kasoma

Twelve-year old Gorret Teddy (not real name) created a Facebook account because she wanted to draw and share her sketches on the platform. One afternoon, a friendly account began to comment, praise her talent and offer tips.

The person claimed to be a teen and an artist too. Over weeks, the messages became private and constant. He asked about school, friends and worries, slowly encouraging secrecy.

"They won't understand our creativity," he said.

When Gorret felt lonely, he reassured her, positioning himself as the only one who cared. He suggested moving to another platform and asked for photos of her artwork, then of herself, promising a feature page.

When Gorret hesitated, he used guilt and flattery, warning she would lose opportunities. He requested video calls at odd hours and urged her to lie to her parents.

Confused and anxious, Gorret withdrew from her



family and her grades slipped.

Her mother noticed changes and guided her to report the account. With support, the grooming stopped and Gorret learned.

THE STATISTICS

Children in Uganda are already being confronted with risks posed by digital technology. Public awareness is low, efforts to prevent risks are limited. When children are subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), they receive little support – and few offenders are brought to justice.

According to the 2024

WHAT GUARDIANS CAN DO

Dr Godfrey Siu, an academic researcher at Makerere University, said parents should openly discuss messages children send and receive on platforms such as WhatsApp.

"If a child is no longer disturbed by explicit images being shared, that is a strong sign of grooming," Siu said.

He warned that grooming normalises inappropriate content for children.

"They are made to appreciate images that are abnormal for their age, which increases their vulnerability," Dr Siu said.

He said there is a growing role of peers in online grooming.

"Research shows peers have overtaken adults in online abuse, with sexual rivalry between students often escalating grooming online," Siu said.

OCSEA findings, 21% of children aged 15-17 in Uganda received unwanted online requests to talk about sex or sexual acts. Although there are no studies showing the scale of online child sexual exploitation and abuse of children across the Uganda, one survey showed more than 60% of unidentified victims in Africa were young children, including infants and toddlers, and 65% were girls.

RED FLAGS

Dr Godfrey Siu, an academic researcher at Makerere University, yesterday said online grooming is often difficult to detect because it usually begins like any other normal relationship.

Online grooming is the process where an individual builds a trusting relationship with a minor online to gain their trust for the purpose of sexual exploitation or abuse.

This abuse can occur entirely online or lead to an in-person meeting.

The key difference, he explained, is that the offender operates with a hidden and harmful motive.

"Online grooming does not happen as a one-off incident. It is a gradual process, and because children are online most of the time, they become easy targets," Dr Siu said.

He explained that early detection depends on regular interaction with children and asking the right questions. Parents and carers should be alert to unusual online behaviour, especially around internet access.

"Some offenders send money to children to keep them online. Ask them where they get data from,

whether they are using Wi-Fi or buying data, and demand accountability," Siu added.

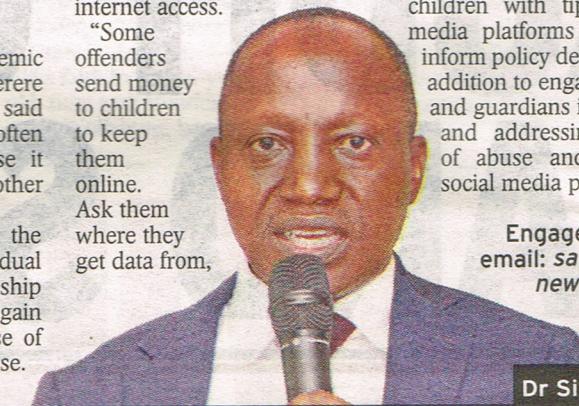
Vision Group over the weekend launched a multimedia campaign across its platforms during the holiday season, aimed at promoting online safety for children.

DIGITAL SAFETY

Special projects content manager Sidney Miria said through this initiative, Vision Group aims at contributing meaningfully to the broader conversation on digital safety and responsibility.

The campaign seeks to equip children with tips on using media platforms responsibly, inform policy development in addition to engaging parents and guardians in identifying and addressing instances of abuse and misuse of social media platforms.

Engage with us on
email: safetyonline@newvision.co.ug



Dr Siu