

BY RANELL DICKSON
NSEREKO

It starts innocently. A heart on your story. A "hey, you seem cool" in your inbox. Just another DM... right? For today's teenagers, the internet isn't just an app—it's a place. Friendships are born in comment sections. Confidence rises and falls with likes. Late-night

chats happen under the blanket, screen brightness on low, heartbeat on high. But hidden behind this familiar digital playground is a danger that doesn't knock loudly. It whispers. And that's what makes it dangerous.

NOT EVERY

VILLAIN LOOKS LIKE ONE

Online predators don't come with warning labels or creepy profile pictures. They blend in like plainclothes detectives. One minute they're your hype person. The next, your emotional support human. They show up as listeners,

admirers, or "someone who finally gets you."

"The scary part is that grooming doesn't feel like danger at first—it feels like attention," says Grace Nambasa, a digital safety and child protection advocate. "Predators start by building trust. Compliments. Daily check-ins. Slowly positioning themselves as

more understanding than everyone else in your life."

By the time boundaries start to blur, emotions are already tangled.

... "I THOUGHT IT
WAS NORMAL...
UNTIL IT WASN'T"

For many teens, the slow

build makes red flags hard to spot. Sarah, 16, thought she was just chatting with a university student.

"He was kind. Always asking how my day was," she recalls. "Then he started asking when I was home alone. That's when my stomach dropped. I blocked him immediately."

That drop? That instinct? That's your inner alarm system. Listen to it.

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SECRETS ARE THE TRAP.

One of the oldest tricks in the predator playbook is secrecy. Conversations move quickly from public comments to private DMs, then to WhatsApp, Telegram, or apps your parents don't even know exist.

"Any adult or stranger who asks a teen to keep secrets is creating isolation," Nambasa explains. "Isolation makes manipulation easier and help harder to reach."

For Kamara Joshua, 17, secrecy came disguised as kindness:

"Someone offered me data and money," he says. "But she insisted I shouldn't tell anyone. That's when I knew something was off. If something is genuinely good, it doesn't need hiding."

SILENCE PROTECTS THE WRONG PERSON.

If a message makes you uncomfortable, you don't owe anyone kindness. Stop replying. Don't share anything personal. Screenshot everything. Report the account using the app's security features. And most importantly, tell a trusted adult in serious cases. A parent. A teacher. A guardian. Someone.

As online spaces continue to shape teenage life, awareness is your strongest shield. The internet offers connection, creativity, and community, but it also demands caution.

Not every friendly message is harmless. Not every follower is a friend.

And remember this: real friendships don't ask for intimacy, demand secrecy, or make you feel unsafe. When a DM feels wrong, trusting that instinct could be the difference between staying safe and becoming a statistic.

Your phone should connect you, not corner you.

Creating a safe space for teenagers to report online threats begins with how adults listen, respond and act. According to **Joselyn Kajumba, a neuropsychologist working with Parliament of Uganda under the Mental Health Forum**, open and consistent communication is the first line of defence. She emphasises the importance of regularly talking to teens about their online lives, not only when a problem arises, but as part of everyday conversations. This approach normalises reporting

and reassures teens that their concerns will be taken seriously. Kajumba stresses that when a teen speaks up, adults should listen without judgment. Calm, supportive responses help build trust, while blame or panic can quickly shut communication down. "The focus should always be on solving the problem and protecting the child, not blaming them for being online," she explains. She adds that adults need to educate themselves about digital platforms and online risks so

they can better understand teens' experiences. Clear boundaries are also important, but they must respect a teen's autonomy to avoid pushing them into secrecy. She warns that many adults unintentionally worsen situations by minimising reports, dismissing abuse as harmless, blaming the teen, or overreacting. "When adults fail to listen or take action, teens feel unsupported and ashamed, making them less likely to report future incidents," Kajumba notes.

EXPERT'S NUGGET



THE GROOMING PATTERN (YES, IT'S A PATTERN).

Child protection experts say grooming often follows a script:

- Excessive friendliness.
- Personal, probing questions.
- Emotional dependence.
- Inappropriate requests. These can include asking for photos, sending sexual content, or guilt-tripping a teen for pulling away.

"The most dangerous weapon isn't force, it's emotional manipulation," Nambasa warns. "Predators say things like, 'You're the only one who understands me,' or 'I'll be hurt if you leave.' That pressure keeps many teens silent."

OVERSHARING: THE FREE CLUE TRAIL.

Predators don't guess, they observe. School uniforms in selfies. Location tags. Daily routines posted like episodes of a reality show. Piece by piece, a digital map is drawn.

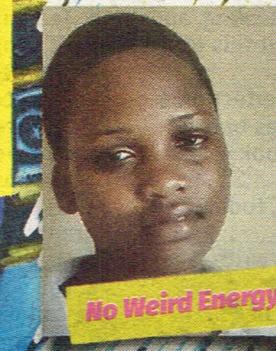
Amina, 15, learned to switch up her online habits.

"I stopped posting where I am in real time," she says. "You don't know who's watching or why they're even watching."

TEENS REACT

Catherine Nabakha, 18, King's College Budo.

"I fear being judged if I speak up. People might think I'm as spoiled as the person sending the messages," Catherine says. She admits that boredom sometimes pushes her to reply to strangers online. "When I'm idle, chatting feels like a way to pass time." She adds that giving people the benefit of the doubt has kept her in conversations longer than she should have. "I like figuring out someone's intentions for myself." Still, her boundaries are firm. "When someone starts asking weird questions or wants things to be private, I get uncomfortable. I respect my body and my privacy, that's when I know it's time to stop."



No Weird Energy

Evans Victor Mutaka Jjemba, 14, Our Lady of Africa Namilyango (OLAN).

"For me, replying to strangers online usually starts with curiosity," Jjemba says. "You wonder who they are and why they chose you." He says he has learned to watch out for warning signs. "When someone starts asking very personal questions or wants to move the conversation into secret spaces, that's when I pause," he explains. "If it doesn't feel right, don't force myself to be polite." Jjemba adds that silence and blocking are sometimes the safest responses. "You don't owe anyone access to your life," he says. "Your safety matters more than being curious or trying to be nice."

Safety Over Politeness



Hannah Pearl Bashabe, 17, Shoma Christian Academy.

"I worry that adults will blame me for being online or punish me by taking my phone instead of helping," Hannah explains. She adds that the reminder that "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7) encourages her to speak up, even when it's difficult. She believes curiosity is why many teens reply to strangers. "You hope it's just someone new to befriend," she says, but notes that Proverbs 14:15 warns against being careless. She trusts her instincts and never ignores red flags. "That gut feeling is often the Holy Spirit warning me," she adds, referencing Isaiah 30:21.



Holy Spirit Guide Me