

Tik Tok, Snapchat, and other apps predators are using to exploit children

by Emma Goss, Eyewitness News

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BAKERSFIELD, Calif. (KBAK/KBFX) - From the Superbowl to the Kern County Fair, human traffickers traditionally target large events to bring young boys and girls into prostitution. But increasingly, predators are lurking online, prying into your child's phone.

Most children have a phone starting at age 11, and they're some of the most vulnerable to human traffickers.

"At any given moment, there are 750,000 predators online who are out there looking for ways to get our kids,"

Angela Look, who works for the Kern County Department of Human Services and supervises the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Program, said.

Look and her colleague, Erin Gillespie, the CSEP program specialist, have seen a rise in Kern County children being sexually exploited and prostituted by online predators.

Human Trafficking is a \$150 billion global industry, and in Kern County in recent years, CSEP has identified 200 children being sexually exploited, the youngest was just 11 years old.

"We're seeing it on Instagram, all over the place," Look said. "Tik Tok. There's over 20 apps that our kids use that most parents don't even know about. That's how they meet people, and set up their dates. And it starts from there," she said.

Gillespie cautions parents to check if their child has downloaded the app called "Meetup," a convenient tool that can be used by predators to get kids to meet them in person.

And any time your child posts a picture or video with their location, Gillespie warns, predators use that data to set up dates, often pretending they're a child too.

Dustin Contreras, co-director for the Kern Coalition Against Human Trafficking, says hashtags are now being coded with messages parents won't understand.

For instance, common ones include, **#LMIRL**, meaning "let's meet in real life," and **#GNRN "get naked right now."**

"With the age of social media, traffickers are only limited by their imagination," Contreras said.

But even more alarming, predators don't even need a post to access children. They're communicating with kids through video games.

It happened three years ago to Look's son when he was 12, playing on a PlayStation 4.

"I happened to find this, that a random stranger sent my son a message that said, "how old are you?" Look recalled.

"Had I not seen that, and intervened, he would have answered the next question. And I don't know what could have happened," Look said.

Contreras recommends parents educate themselves on human trafficking tactics by visiting [PolarisProject.org](https://www.polarisproject.org) and the Kern Coalition Against Human Trafficking.

And Look suggests checking with your cell phone provider about how to link your phone so any time your child wants to download a new app, or visit a restricted web site, you have to approve it.

"Just maintaining an open dialogue with your kids is huge," Look said.

"As a parent, and you're talking to your kids, even though you think they're not listening, they're listening," Gillespie said.