

FOR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS OF SCHOOL-AGE KIDS

# Fake images, **real harm**

**AI-altered photos and the school year: what to know and what to say.**

Free AI tools can take an ordinary photo of a child and turn it into an explicit image. The child did nothing wrong. The child often doesn't know it happened. And the photo is usually one that was never hidden in the first place: a post, a team picture, a snapshot on a friend's phone. This page is what to know and what to say before it's a problem in your family or your child's school.

## The part most parents have backwards

Parents brace for a stranger. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), which takes these reports for the whole country, describes something closer to home: "NCMEC is seeing a growing number of these incidents in schools across the country, most often involving classmates ages 14 to 17."

That sentence changes the conversation. If the likeliest person is somebody your child sits next to, then "here's how to stay safe" is only half of the talk. The other half is "you must never be the one who does this." Both halves, same conversation.

**"While the images aren't real, the harm they cause is."**

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, August 11, 2026

Keep that line handy. It answers the objection that stops this conversation cold (it's fake, so what's the damage?). The humiliation and the spreading and the fear are real to the child in the picture.

## Five steps, from the people who take the reports

NCMEC's own back-to-school checklist for parents, in its order. The headings are NCMEC's. The notes under them are ours.

- 1 Educate yourself first.** You don't need to be technical. You need to know this is possible with ordinary free tools, and that blocking one app won't make it go away.
- 2 Start the conversation early.** Before there's a problem. A child who has already heard it from you is far more likely to come to you.

- 3 **Set expectations and encourage upstanders.** Making or sharing an image like this of another person is never okay. If your child is sent one or sees one: don't save it, don't share it, tell a trusted adult.
- 4 **Keep the conversation going.** Ask about new apps and trends the way you ask about friends. Often, briefly, and without an interrogation.
- 5 **Know what to do if it happens.** Tell a trusted adult, report the image to the platform it's on, and report it to NCMEC's CyberTipline.

### If it happens to your child

- **Your child is not in trouble.** Say it first and say it plainly. Shame is what keeps a child quiet while the image spreads.
- **Write down where it is, and never copy the image.** Note the app or site, the usernames, who sent it and when. Keep the messages and the account. Do not save, screenshot or forward the image itself, to anyone, including other parents and the school. Tell the police or the CyberTipline where it is and let them collect it.
- **Report it to the CyberTipline.** [report.cybertip.org](https://report.cybertip.org) or 1-800-843-5678. It is NCMEC's national reporting system.
- **Report it to the platform, and know the new federal deadline.** Since May 19, 2026, under the federal TAKE IT DOWN Act, covered apps and sites must remove an intimate image within 48 hours of a valid request. The Federal Trade Commission says the law covers "real images, digitally altered images, and deepfakes created with artificial intelligence." If a platform ignores the request or has no way to make one, tell the FTC at [TakeItDown.ftc.gov](https://TakeItDown.ftc.gov).
- **Use NCMEC's Take It Down tool if the image is on your child's own device.** [takeitdown.ncmec.org](https://takeitdown.ncmec.org) is free and anonymous. It makes a digital fingerprint of the image, on the device, and shares only the fingerprint so participating platforms can block copies. The image never leaves the phone. It can't help if you don't have the file, and NCMEC says it "will not work on encrypted platforms or surfaces." (Despite the name, it is a separate thing from the federal law above.)
- **Tell the school and ask what it will do.** The companion card, Questions to Ask Your Child's School, is built for that conversation.
- **Keep your eyes on your child.** If your child talks about not wanting to be here, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any hour.

[Note: This touches on legal territory. Depending on the images and the ages involved, making, keeping or sharing an image like this can be a crime, including for a well-meaning adult who saves a copy as proof. Laws differ by state. Verify with law enforcement or a licensed attorney before acting on it.]

## Words you can borrow

### Before anything has happened

"There are apps that can turn a normal picture of somebody into a fake naked one. If that ever happens to you, you're not in trouble, and I want to know right away. And making one of somebody else, or passing one along, is never a joke. It hurts a real person and it can be a crime."

### If your child comes to you

"Thank you for telling me. You did the right thing and you're not in trouble. We're going to handle this together. We're not going to look at it again and we're not going to send it to anybody."

### If your child made one or passed one along

"I love you, and this is serious. A real person is hurt. We're going to stop it from spreading and tell the truth about it, and I'm going to get advice before we do anything else." Then get that advice. The legal note above applies to your child too.

## Who your child can go to

Name the adults out loud, so the answer already exists when it's needed: a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a school counselor.

This handout is educational and is not legal advice or professional counseling. If a child is in distress, contact a school counselor or a licensed mental-health professional.

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### Sources, checked September 17, 2026

- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Emma Henderson Vaughan, "Back-to-School Checklist: Talk About AI 'Nudify' Apps," August 11, 2026 ([missingkids.org](https://missingkids.org)). Both quotations and the five step headings were checked against the source page on September 17, 2026.
- NCMEC, Take It Down, Frequently Asked Questions ([takeitdown.ncmec.org/faq](https://takeitdown.ncmec.org/faq)), and NCMEC CyberTipline ([report.cybertip.org](https://report.cybertip.org)).
- Federal Trade Commission, Consumer Advice, "What will the FTC's enforcement of the TAKE IT DOWN Act mean for you?", May 19, 2026.
- 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org).

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