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I'm a Jacksonville pediatrician. Let's crack the code to stopping online child predators.

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An online child predator is someone who seeks contact with children and adolescents on the internet for abusive and exploitative purposes that are typically sexual. They use the internet as a method to facilitate contact with children to potentially harm them online or offline.

In today's digital age, our children and youth spend increasing amounts of time surfing the internet. Federal investigation revealed that more than 500,000 online predators are active each day and they have multiple online profiles. More than 50% of victims are aged 12 to 15 and 89% are contacted by online predators through chat rooms and instant messaging.

Online predators use sophisticated techniques to gain children's trust. Once a connection is established, they attempt to isolate the child, manipulate and ultimately coerce them into sharing personal information or engaging in explicit online activities, meeting for sex, sextortion and making of child sexual abuse material.

This can lead to long-term emotional and psychological harm as well as potential physical danger.

Overall, 1-in-3 victims do not tell anyone about their experience with sextortion. It is, therefore, crucial to set clear guidance and boundaries such as time limits, age-appropriate content and utilizing parental controls to monitor online activities and filter harmful content.

Schools and communities can play a major role in raising awareness about online safety. Introducing educational programs that can equip children with knowledge and skills to recognize and avoid predators will empower our children and youth to make informed decisions.

Law enforcement agencies must be vigilant in investigating and prosecuting online child predators. Federal enticement statute criminalizes the act of persuading and enticing any individual under the age of 18 in any sexual activity for which an individual can be charged.

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Therefore, online predators expressing their intent to harm a child sexually online — with or without steps to meet offline — have already committed a crime and must face justice.

Finally, the fight against online child predators requires a collaborative effort. Efforts enforced by parental alertness, school education, community awareness and law enforcement, can allow us to create a safer online environment for our children and protect them from this hideous threat.

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This guest column is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Times-Union. We welcome a diversity of opinions.