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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

From: Eric M. Hoffman, Prosecuting Attorney  
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**Internet Safety and Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

*Muncie Indiana* - It is not a stretch to say the COVID-19 pandemic has turned just about every aspect of life on its head. Many of us are working from home and all Hoosier students finished the school year taking online classes. As we prepare for the start of another school year, many districts are opting to start with online classes, while some are going for a hybrid approach, with some in-person instruction coupled with online learning. Most of the districts that are returning to the classroom are also offering an online option for students. No matter what option your family goes with during this school year, it is reasonable to expect screen time will increase for Hoosier children. This is on top of what is likely an increase in screen time and exposure to the internet due to many popular outdoor activities and events being cancelled as a safety precaution.

As Prosecutor, I wanted to remind parents, grandparents and guardians of children that we must constantly be vigilant in what our children are exposed to and who they are interacting with online. We've already seen the numbers of online exploitation complaints rise this past spring when lockdowns ramped up across the world. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, a global organization that disseminates tips to law enforcement, cataloged 4.1 million reports of cyber abuse against children in April 2020, four times as many complaints as they received in April of 2019.

With so much going on, it can be daunting to try and add on additional monitoring of a child's online activity but online exploitation of children can, unfortunately, happen to anyone. Online predators can pretend to be many different people on many different sites in an attempt to befriend children and teens before trying to coerce them into sending photos or videos or meeting in person. Parents and guardians have to be diligent in monitoring social media use, staying up to date on the latest apps and trends as well as having open conversations about internet safety. If you're not sure where to start, commonsensemedia.org is a great resource for many tech related issues as well as how to set parental controls on your children's devices.

Potential warning signs that someone may be grooming your child online or that your child may be in trouble can include your child constantly being online and

not wanting to do anything else, becoming angry when unable to get online, turning off the computer or locking their screen when you enter a room, receiving calls or packages from people you don't know and withdrawing from family and friends. This is not an exhaustive list but it's helpful to have some idea of what to look for. My office remains committed to protecting those among us who are the most vulnerable, including children. As we all struggle to figure out what normal looks like these days, rest assured that anyone who engages in these kinds of heinous acts against children will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

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