

How Predators Use AI to Target Children in 2026

By the DSK Research Team · April 2026

When most parents think about online predators, they picture someone sending direct messages on social media. That picture is outdated. In 2026, predators have access to sophisticated artificial intelligence tools that allow them to operate at a scale and level of sophistication that would have been unimaginable five years ago. This article explains exactly how these tools are being used — and what families can do about it.

1 in 5

children in the US receives an unwanted sexual solicitation online each year. AI is making this number significantly worse.

The Rise of AI-Powered Grooming

Grooming is the process by which a predator builds trust with a child over time before attempting exploitation. Traditionally, this required time, patience, and the risk of one-on-one exposure. AI changes the economics of this crime dramatically.

Modern large language models can carry on indistinguishable human conversations indefinitely, across thousands of targets simultaneously, without fatigue, and without the risk of voice recognition or physical exposure. A single bad actor can now operate what amounts to an industrial-scale grooming operation using freely available AI tools.

Tactic 1 — AI Personas on Roleplay Platforms

Platforms like Character.AI allow users to create custom AI "characters" with any personality, backstory, and communication style. Predators create AI personas designed to appeal to children — often presenting as peers, romantic interests, or authority figures. These bots are programmed to gradually introduce inappropriate topics while maintaining the illusion of a safe relationship.

⚠️ Real documented cases:

Multiple families have reported that their children formed what they believed were real friendships on Character.AI, only to discover they had been communicating with a bot programmed to elicit personal information and photographs.

Tactic 2 — AI-Generated Deepfake Images

Using only a few publicly available photos — often from a child's social media account — AI image generation tools can create realistic fabricated images. These images are then used in sextortion attacks: the predator contacts the child claiming to have compromising images and threatening to share them unless the child complies with demands.

This crime is devastating because the images don't need to be real to cause serious psychological harm. The threat alone is often sufficient to coerce victims into compliance.

Tactic 3 — Voice Cloning for Trust Building

AI voice cloning technology can replicate a person's voice from just a few seconds of audio. There are documented cases of bad actors cloning the voices of people a child knows — teachers, family friends — to create audio messages that establish false trust or manufactured urgency.

Tactic 4 — AI-Assisted Phishing of Children

Traditional phishing targets adults for financial information. A growing variant targets children. AI-written messages, perfectly tailored to a child's vocabulary, interests, and social context, are used to extract information — school name, home address, daily routine — that can then be used to facilitate physical-world contact.

"The barrier to entry for this type of crime has collapsed. What used to require technical skill and significant time investment can now be done by anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection." — DSK Research Team

How to Protect Your Family

- **Remove children from roleplay AI platforms** — Character.AI, Replika, and similar apps have no appropriate place in a child's digital life
- **Set all social media profiles to private** — limit the photo material available to bad actors for deepfake generation
- **Talk to your children about deepfakes** — explain that AI can create convincing fake images, and that threats based on fake images are still a serious crime
- **Establish a family code word** — a word only family members know, used to verify identity in unexpected or urgent calls or messages
- **Report sextortion immediately** — to NCMEC (cybertipline.org) and local law enforcement. Do not pay under any circumstances.
- **Use only AI tools with strong safety filters** — Claude (Anthropic) and similar platforms with documented child safety measures

✅ Bottom line for parents:

AI has made predatory tactics faster, cheaper, and significantly harder to detect. The answer is not panic — it is education. A child who understands how these tools work, what the warning signs look like, and who trusts their parent enough to report concerns is significantly harder to manipulate than one who doesn't.

If You Suspect Your Child Is Being Targeted

- Do not delete any messages or evidence
- Screenshot everything with timestamps
- Contact NCMEC: 1-800-843-5678 or cybertipline.org
- Contact FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center: ic3.gov
- Report to the platform where contact occurred
- Seek professional support for your child — this is traumatic regardless of outcome