



SPOT THE SIGNS

A Guide for Youth on Manipulation, Red Flags, and Safety in Online Chats

The internet is a great place to chat, connect, share stuff and have fun — but not every person or message is what they seem. Sometimes, people you meet online have bad intentions. It's not always easy to tell the difference between normal, friendly interactions and behavior that could turn harmful or even criminal. Even if you're careful and alert to warning signs, someone might still cross a line – and that is never your fault.

This guide is here to help you understand manipulation, spot red flags, and feel safe and in control online. Let's talk about what to watch out for, and what to do if something feels off.

WHAT IS ONLINE MANIPULATION?

Online manipulation happens when someone uses tricks or pressure to influence your thoughts, feelings, or actions, often to get something they want. It can seem friendly at first, but the goal is often to control or take advantage of you.






Online manipulation can happen on gaming platforms, social media, private messages, and group chats.

EXAMPLES OF RED FLAGS

- **Guilt and pressure:** *"If you really cared about me, you would..."*
- **Pushing your boundaries:** *"Just one photo, it's not a big deal"*
- **Hiding things:** *"Let's keep this a secret"*
- **Emotional pressure:** *"You're the only one who understands me"*
- **Grooming tactics:** *"You're so mature for your age"*

These are just a few common examples. **Any** message that makes you uncomfortable in **any way** is a red flag!

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

-  Love bombing, too much attention
-  Guilt-tripping or emotional blackmail
-  Trying to isolate you
-  Pressure to keep secrets
-  Asking for photos, money or personal info

You are not alone.

It is completely normal to meet and chat with new people online. But if someone makes you feel uncomfortable, confused, or guilty, that's a sign something isn't right. It's never your fault if someone crosses a line. No matter what has happened or what they've told you, you can always talk to an adult and get help – **no matter what.**

WHAT TO DO IF SOMETHING FEELS OFF

If someone online is making you or your friend feel weird or something doesn't feel right, trust your instincts. It's okay to step back, you don't have to keep replying or figure it out alone.

Here are some steps you can take to stay safe and get help:



Take a break and stop replying



Block, mute or report



Talk to a trusted adult



Save messages and take screenshots



Don't be afraid to say no or set boundaries

HOW TO HELP A FRIEND

If a friend tells you about something uncomfortable or worrying that happened online – stay calm, listen, and let them know they're not alone. The best thing you can do is support them and help them talk to a safe adult.

Read more about how to help a friend at www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/myfriendtoo.

HARMFUL ONLINE GROUPS

Some dangerous groups target teens in chats or online spaces. They might try to pressure you to share photos, do risky or violent things, or give away personal info.

Watch out if someone:

- Shares extreme or hateful ideas or material
- Pressures you to send photos, harm yourself or others, or keep secrets
- Tells you not to trust friends or family

It's normal to feel scared about speaking up, but this is not your fault. These groups use manipulation to control people, and the police and other adults understand this and want to help. If you end up in this situation, don't be afraid to reach out for help right away.

TRUST YOUR GUT

Ask yourself:

- Does this message feel weird or uncomfortable?
- Do I feel pressured to do things I don't want to do?
- Are they asking me to keep secrets?
- Do I feel confused or unsure about what's happening?

Remember, staying safe online is all about trusting yourself and setting your own boundaries. If something feels wrong, it's okay to step back, say no, or talk to someone you trust. **There is no shame in asking for help.** You're not alone, and you do not have to handle confusing or uncomfortable situations by yourself.