Steve 0:00

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Steve 0:44

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Steve 1:48

Welcome to At Work in America, the podcast that leads the conversation on the future of work, proudly sponsored by Paychex and Workhuman. We go beyond the headlines to uncover bold ideas, fresh perspectives and the real stories of people shaping workplaces for the better. And now, here are your hosts: Steve Boese and Trish Steed; bringing you the insights and trends that will inspire what's next in the world of work.

Steve 2:22

Welcome to the At Work in America show. My name's Steve Boese. I'm with Trish Steed. Trish, how are you?

Trish 2:26

I'm good! How are you doing?

Steve 2:28

I'm great! I'm very excited today. I love doing the show, Trish, and I think one of the best parts of this show over the last few years is: we take a really expansive approach to the subjects that we cover; the guests that we welcome. We're talking about a super important topic today, one we've never covered before, and quite frankly, I can't wait to dive into.

Trish 2:48

Me too. I think when we're trying to do things where we're more broadly thinking about how organizations or individual employees can experience different things in the community, this is one that obviously should be familiar, but we need to know more about it.

Steve 3:03

Yeah, so let's dig into it. We're going to be talking with Gavin Portnoy. He's with us. Gavin, hello. Good morning. As the case may be, we're recording this in the morning. How are you?

Gavin Portnoy 3:11

Hey, Steve, hey Trish, thanks for having me on.

Steve 3:13

Thank you. Gavin is the Vice President of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Strategic Advancement and Partnerships Organization, Gavin has informed us they call it NCMEC. NCMEC is typically how we refer to that so we'll probably use that term for the rest of the show. Gavin, we are so happy to have you here to learn more about you, of course, and learn more about the really important work your organization does; as well as how organizations that listen to the show and business leaders who listen to the show can get involved. So Gavin, first off, let's learn a bit more about you and the organization, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and their mission.

Gavin Portnoy 4:00

Again, thanks for having me on. We're a very important organization in my own humble opinion. We actually just celebrated our 40th anniversary last year. It's really exciting that we're here. We like to say that we're here for all families. We would not like to remain a secret. We want people to know we're here. If, God forbid, something happens to your children, you know where to turn. We also know prevention is the best medicine, so we're also making sure parents are aware of the real world and online dangers that kids face every day. I myself, I am the Vice President of the communications team here at the National Center. I come to you via a long background of television producing. I like to say I'm a recovering television producer. Most notably, worked with John Walsh on America's Most Wanted for about a decade. Those who may know a little bit about the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, it is John Walsh's charity. He and his wife Revé , co founded it 40 years ago, after the tragic kidnapping and disappearance of their son, Adam. Adam was later found murdered, and they turned that grief that they had into this incredible organization. As of now, we've helped recover over 400,000 missing kids. Our hotline has received over 5 million calls helping families and law enforcement recover missing children and deal with issues of online sexual exploitation of children. Our cyber tip line just celebrated its 20th anniversary not too long ago. People who knew us back in the day knew us as the milk carton organization, and that has kind of slipped a little bit now. Missing kids are still a very important issue that we'll talk about, but online protection and protecting your kids online is more important now than ever. In 2023, we're still crunching the 2024 numbers, we had 36 million reports to the NCMEC cyber tip line. So you know, it is really important that we're the clearinghouse of these missing cases and of these reports. We're getting that information out to law enforcement to help bring these kids home. I always like to say that what we want to do is really flip everything on its head. We want to really be the preventative organization. We would love to put ourselves out of business, to be honest with you. Unfortunately, we don't live in a world where that is going to happen any day soon. We're here for families. We're here for kids. We're here for law enforcement to really help protect children no matter where they are.

Trish 6:38

I just want to say thank you, first of all, for the work that you do. I can't believe it's been 40 years. Honestly, it seems like yesterday when we were hearing that story of Adam being missing. I remember that being on the television. Since then, obviously the show, and now the work that you're doing beyond the show is really helpful to parents with in-person dangers, which I think parents try to tell them [their kids] to be aware of strangers and whatnot, but it's this online piece I'm really fascinated about. I feel like, even as a parent, I don't know that I was educated enough myself to prevent things from happening. Could you maybe talk a little bit about the efforts that you're doing right now when it comes to prevention of online encounters that children might be engaging with without knowing?

Gavin Portnoy 7:32

I'll play off of one thing you just said before I get into the prevention piece, and you're exactly right. I think a lot of parents still prioritize real world safety, and we all kind of grew up in the era of the white van, and the reality is: the white van is now in your pocket. It's in your living room via technology. So, you know, we're really trying to flip that and that that does drive a lot of our preventative resources that we're putting out there. We have a number of programs starting as young as kindergarten for children, and really, we want to empower kids to be good digital citizens, to know where they can go online, to know how to behave online, to know proper behaviors that they can and should be doing. We never try to put things directly in the hands of children. We try to put them in the in the hands of caregivers who are then going to explain it further to kids. This could be parents, this could be an aunt, uncle, teacher, you name it, anybody under the sun who is going to care about that child. So Netsmatrz is the program. It's free to everyone out there. If you go to NCMEC.org you can get to it from there. It's an incredible age-appropriate resources for people to empower their kids to be safe online. Where we're seeing the most problems, though, are older kids: teens that have access to devices into the internet. There was a time where they obviously didn't have access to this stuff, right? But now, just with technology being as prevalent as is, they're getting their hands on devices younger and younger and younger. The term for the abuse that we're going to talk about here today is online enticement. So, we're seeing predators go out of out of the woodwork to try to entice kids to share imagery with them online. Over the last three years, we've seen a 300% increase in this particular crime.

Steve 9:24

Tthere could be super devastating consequences just from that, right? You know, some children even commit suicide over it, right? I saw on the news recently, where a child had gotten coerced into sending some images, and then the blackmailing started. It was an awful outcome.

Gavin Portnoy 9:47

We've seen some cases of that, where it's within hours. There's one case that comes to mind, I won't say the victim's name, but the child said goodnight to mom and dad, went to bed, was texting on their phone and ended up being coerced to send an image. It's happening more to young boys, which is interesting.

Steve 10:06

Yeah, the case I just heard about what happened to be a young boy.

Gavin Portnoy 10:10

I'll get into the prevention program in a moment, but what they end up doing is: they share the photo, and next thing they know, they're being told, "if you don't get money via gift card or something of this nature within the next X amount of time, I'm going to distribute your image to everyone you know, or to your school, your classmates, your sports team." These kids get desperate, and, you know, some of them end up giving the money. But, we've also seen quite a few cases where kids are committing suicide as a result of this. So, I mean, it is absolutely terrifying. I think it's every parent's worst nightmare. Again, we do have age appropriate resources that talk about this at a younger age, but the one that we created that's a little bit older is called No Escape Room. What we did is we poured over all the cyber tip line reports we had that met this criteria of online enticement, specifically, sextortion, from the last couple of years, and we created a story that was based on those real cyber tip line reports. So, you know, the reality is, many parents have experienced that heart dropping moment of 'where's the kid," right? When you're in a store, when you're out in public, contrast that to crimes against children online. Very few parents have experienced that, right? So what we thought was, all right, well, let's flip the script. Let's get that white van out of on the street and into the home so parents have a psychological connection to this crime and what we're seeing. So, we took all those cyber tip line reports that we had, again, fastest growing crime that we're seeing here at the National Center online, and turned it into a script and actually let parents, let caregivers, be in the driver's seat of what these kids are going through. The script, again, I personally went through countless of these with my team here, it's very similar across the board. It's a young boy gets a ping, and it can be on any number of apps, there's not a particular social media company where this is prevalent. It's happening all over the place. We're even seeing happening on gaming apps.

Steve 12:18

The evil actors go where the people are that they're trying to prey upon, right?

Gavin Portnoy 12:22

They're everywhere. Where there's a will, there's a way, unfortunately, right? So all that to say, we built the script that actually puts you in the driver's seat. And that script is, I mean, very similar across the board. It's a young boy who gets a ping from a very attractive female, in many cases, and oftentimes, you know, it's a pirated image. We've seen ones where it's an AI generated image, you name it, it's there. They start this conversation and exchange. And again, we've seen ones where it's hours, and we've seen other ones where it progresses over days. The No Escape Room scenario is over a couple of hours. We did that route. It's a kind of a choose your own adventure. Remember the books were you get to choose your own adventure? What happens in this experience is, you decide how this young boy is going to respond to the person on the other end. And at the end of it, you still are driven to to the point where the crime takes place, in this case. But we're very, very proud of it. We've had over 2.6 million people go through the experience to date. It's award winning now. It's won a couple of very specific web awards. So, we're very proud of it. We think every parent, caregiver, anybody with a kid in their life, needs to go through this. And again, that can be found either through our website, NCMEC.org, you can get to it directly via No Escape Room.

Steve 13:43

Do you need any special equipment to go through the experience? Is it a VR type of experience? Can just do it through your computer, browser type thing?

Gavin Portnoy 13:50

You can do it through your browser, on a phone, on a tablet, computer, you name it.

Steve 13:55

That's fantastic and free, right? Access is open to everyone, right? We want to get this experience in the hands of as many parents as possible.

Gavin Portnoy 14:03

It's free to everyone. And again, it's not a fear monger at all. You know, once you get through the experience, it drives you to those resources that we have available. So again, the Netsmartz piece is very important. It also drives you to the cyber tip line, where, if you've gone through this, you can make a report. You know, make a report right then and there. We can bring those law enforcement resources to bear. We can get that that tip to the right person and help you out. And then the other tool that we have, which is really interesting, is called Take It Down. And, you know, there was a era not too long ago where the internet was forever, right? Remember those days? We're proud to say that that is not true when it comes to crimes against children. Take It Down is another free service that the National Center offers, and what it does is, if you were under the age of 18, or were under the age of 18 when an illicit image or video of you was taken, and you have access to that image, you can, on your on your device, basically create a digital fingerprint of it. Send us that fingerprint. You don't actually send us the image at all. Send us that hash value. We take that digital fingerprint, that hash value, and we make it available to electronic service providers, so social media companies, websites, so on and so forth. They then scrub their platforms for it, so if it exists on there, they'll take it off. But, what's even more important is it prevents the upload of those images or imagery in the future. It's very interesting, cool tech that we have out there, if a kid does do this. And look, the reality is, we know it's gonna happen. We encourage families to talk to the kids about not doing this, but if it does happen, we do have resources to help take it down.

Trish 15:47

I have so many questions spinning in my head. Thank you for sharing all of that. Gavin, one question I would have is, how would you talk to parents about opening up those lines of communication? Because whether you think you have a child that you want to talk about this with, or one who has already done something like that, what are some of the first steps to get a parent more comfortable? Is it to go through the No Escape Room? Is that the entry point and then it guides you? What do you recommend?

Gavin Portnoy 16:15

I think going through No Escape Room and seeing what their kids are going through would be helpful. The absolute biggest thing we recommend is, "don't come at your child in any any particular kind of way." You have to be welcoming. You have to have to open up that conversation and be the trusted voice for that kid. Really have an active conversation about what they're doing online. We've entered a world where, I think of friends and colleagues I have in the world that I live in day-to-day, where they know everything about their kids' sports, their academics and what they're doing in school. They know their friends, they know all of this stuff. But when it comes to their digital life, they don't know. They don't know what platforms they're on, they don't know what social media they're on, they don't know how they're engaging. So I think it really helps having that open dialog, having that that conversation with your kids about where are they, what are they doing. Is it going a step further and not allowing certain platforms? I mean, again, for every family, it's a personal decision. Being as involved with their [kid's] digital life as their real world life is incredibly important. That is the absolute best thing they can do.

Trish 17:30

I heard recently on the news there are cases now using AI, where it could be just a photo with clothing on, and they're sort of generating a fake image. Does that include photos like that of your child as well?

Gavin Portnoy 17:51

Essentially, if you have an image of your child that's elicit in any any way, it'll, it'll work in that regard. You did just bring up a really interesting point. I don't mean to like, go down another bunny hole. But, you know, sextortion is the quickest rising thing that we're looking at. Right on the tail of it is AI, and, what you just referred to, there's a couple of different names for it out there, but they're kind of called nudeify app. It's the scourge of the earth, to be honest with you.

Steve 18:21

In many ways, it's more sinister, Gavin, right? Because it requires less, it requires your child not to do anything wrong at all, right? They're just existing in the world, and someone else has just decided to take advantage of that, right?

Gavin Portnoy 18:33

We've seen some cases where some families are just hyper vigilant. You know? They don't have any digital footprint. Yeah, their children are not on social media, their images are not out there. And a boy in a school took a picture and, you know, put this young girl through one of these apps and then distributed the imagery throughout the school. The reality is, that's becoming something that we're extremely concerned about here. I will say also the deep fake, the generated imagery, we call it generative artificial intelligence, the GAI imagery that's coming through is gumming up our system. In 2023 again, we're still crunching 2024, we had 4700 of these images through our system. And in some cases, there was a time not too long ago where AI looked at and people were like, "wow that's fake," you know? But it's quickly getting to the point where it's unrecognizable from the real. So, this is tying up our analysts, our resources here, and then, in other cases, law enforcement. We don't go knock on doors here at the National Center, we provide the analysis to law enforcement. They go and they proceed with justice, if you will. It gums up their resources committees. I mean, it really is just terrifying. So that is another thing. We're mostly seeing young boys use those apps. Parents aren't telling their children the difference between right and wrong when it comes to some of these, these things. And then, you know, of course, there are whole other lines of advocacy that you can go down when it comes to the allowance of these things to exist.

Trish 20:14

I think as parents, you can only warn your children of what you're aware of. So to me, the first step in what you're offering is really making the parents more aware, so that you don't have to be judgmental right after the fact. You're able to educate yourself first, so that you can be that trusted source for your child at whatever age. When you're sort of crunching these numbers, are you seeing that it's typically strangers to the student or to the child, or is it often someone they know, whether that's a fellow student or whether it's a you know, an adult, they know?

Gavin Portnoy 20:53

It's still very much an emerging trend, but what we've seen in the cases that we do know about, it's often a classmate or somebody that they know that's doing it. And the other thing is, we need communities to be active about this. What's happening in some of these cases is, you know, for a number of reasons, the family that has the image taken or distributed doesn't want to make big noise about it, right? For, obvious reasons, right? And then conversely, you have communities where, you know, perhaps the school board or the leadership of a community doesn't want it to get out that they've got this problem. So I think, you know, having people be willing to speak up and really get their voices out there about this problem does mean a lot. We're currently in talks with a couple of families that have been through this. There's a couple that is mad that this is happening. They're mad that the apps are allowed in the first place. They're mad that kids are using them to hurt their children. You'll see over the next, I'll say next coming year, you're going to see some legislation that directly targets this problem. You're going to see advocates who really have a strong opinion about what's out there and how it's being used.

Steve 22:08

This is a perfect example of, some regulation that is certainly in order here to protect children. You know, that's what this is about, right? I can't imagine why anyone couldn't get behind that, right? So hopefully that will happen, Gavin.

Gavin Portnoy 22:28

There's a couple in the pipeline right now, again, legislatively, that I think will make a big difference. I really look at the advocates in the communities also to just be loud about this. And again, Trish, I think you hit it perfectly: parents need to know about these issues. I think it was a lot easier probably, to be a parent 20 years ago than it is now. But again, time is relative. You know, another really easy way to stay informed is if you just follow NCMEC on social media, so @ NCMEC, if you name the channel, we're there, Tiktok, Twitter/X, sorry, all the Meta platforms, were there. And what we're doing is, as we see trends, we're not waiting weeks, months, years. I still remember when the analyst here told us about this extortion crime. We started piecing together the online enticement trends, connecting the dots that there was a lot more of this than she thought. We had content out within weeks that we were able to identify it. So we identified the trend, and we started putting prevention messaging out there right away. So please follow us, and, you know, get involved in your community and make sure you know what your kids are doing online.

Trish 23:50

I do have a question, kind of, if we flip it upside down a little bit. so what if you are the parent, maybe of a teenager, right? And it's not so much what's being done or asked of them? What if you want to make sure your child isn't asking for pictures or something of another student? Because I know at that age, they don't realize they're committing a crime. Is there any guidance on the site for how to have those discussions with your team to make sure they're not exploiting someone else, like, unintentionally?

Gavin Portnoy 24:22

All, all those talking points are up there and included on the website. It is a two way street, Trish. The ways to have those conversations with your child at an age appropriate level, yeah, all that, all that stuff is up there.

Trish 24:39

It was shocking to me. I have a boy and girl twins that are now 21 but you know, back in the day, when they were much younger, I was shocked at how many young men were asking not just my daughter, but her friends for nudes. This is when they were in, like, eighth, ninth, 10th grade. It is not the boys you would assume. It's the boys from good families, if you will. So I think as a parent, like here, I had a son, I immediately went home and I'm like, Hey, right? You have to have this conversation. I would have never thought that until I started seeing it happen. So I love that you're sort of seeing these trends as a bigger picture and sharing that out with parents, because that way you're not waiting till something's being asked of your child, right? You're sort of being that proactive parent. Maybe talk a little bit about how organizations can help spread this awareness and spread the word about the resources, because I know that's something that, as business leaders, we love to be able to do. We want to help our employees when it comes to resources they need.

Gavin Portnoy 25:45

There are a number of ways that organizations, companies, other nonprofits, you name it, can get involved with our mission here. The first is really, just get involved, share those resources with your staff. Everything is kind of bite-sized content that you can share. From an HR level for business trainings, we have a free online training portal called Connect where, again, appropriate resourcing for parents all the way up through professionals, can go there to basically learn more about how to protect kids in their communities. Again, 100% free. So getting involved in that way, sharing our our social media accounts, because I know it sounds simple, and everyone's like, come on, like you want us to follow another company? But the reality is, if you follow NCMEC, what will happen is, if there's a missing child within your area, every single missing case that comes to the center is sent, is distributed and geo targeted. So we're not blanking the whole country every time there's a missing kid, but we're sending those via social media so people can be aware of where kids are missing in their community. We also create advertising, even if you don't follow us, we are creating ads of those kids. So I know it sounds cross, you know, so if you're not following us for whatever reason, we will create an advertisement within the social media platforms that pushes it to that community to help be on the lookout for those missing kids. And we've been extremely effective at that. Another way to get involved is: we are a nonprofit. The work that we do here is: we are a public-private partnership. We do receive some federal funding, but we also receive a good amount of public funding, and we have a number of corporations that make our mission possible. We honestly couldn't keep the lights on and do the work that we're doing without that support. So, you know, those are three really easy ways, I think, to get involved. But I again, I think just even at the base level, just having that conversation with your employees, like, "Hey, did you know that there's this issue, or that there's this growing crime?" Even just, "hey, you remember the milk carton?" You know, to kind of get that conversation going again, it really can and will make a world of difference in your lives.

Steve 27:59

Yeah, my big takeaways, Gavin, is just how remarkably advanced the approaches that you're taking at NCMEC to this challenge are, right? Adapting with the times, adapting to new technology, how children are being exploited, potentially. You've come an incredibly long way from that the proverbial milk carton, right? It's like, we know that, right? And one of the reasons we wanted to have this conversation was to bring some of this to light. Because everybody knows about the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. We've heard of it, I think most of us, but knowing the depths and the complexity and the sophisticated approaches you're taking there at the organization to keep kids safe and spread that word is why we wanted to have this conversation. I'm so glad we did, because it's so eye opening to see. It's really in a time where people are on edge and not feeling great about many things. It's very heartening to know that an organization like yours, the entire team there, is out there with this mission to keep kids safe. It's fantastic.

Gavin Portnoy 27:59

Thank you, Steve. I really appreciate that. And, yeah, I mean, we really, the team here is incredible. We have 450 employees that truly have made this their life's work: to help, you know, we like to say, to help make sure every child has a safe childhood. And I think, you know, whatever stone we have to overturn or whatever widget we need to make, you know, we're willing to do it.

Steve 29:21

That's great! That's great!

Trish 29:22

I think so too. If I think back to even when the TV show was on, right, and it was, if you had a tip, you could call in, I think now it actually includes those of us, then in the community, if you're having the geo targeted information about missing children come out. It gives you something as the recipient of that message, you feel like you can be part of helping it. You may not have a tip about the actual child that's missing, but you can share that with your connections, right, your social media connections, and sort of widen the net.

Gavin Portnoy 29:52

Exactly! And that, that really is the intent behind it. Trish, you know, at the end of every episode of America's Most Wanted, which is back, by the way, shameless plug, I've seen it. It is back. Mr. Walsh and his son, Callahan, are back. But all that to say at the end of every episode, John says, you can make a difference. And I really think that that's the core of where we're trying to get with making sure those posters are in your community, you know, making sure that they're front and center. That is another way, not to go completely back a little we were talking about how they get involved, that is something else that we've seen companies do. They can share our missing child feed. We also have a QR code that you can print out. If you're a physical business, you can put the QR code there, and someone just scans it, and it'll automatically show you missing kids in your area. So just, really, we kind of moved the milk carton from being, you know, physical, tangible thing, to, I actually have one sitting right here. Podcast listeners can't see it, but we have luggage tags that are out there that have a QR. So it's the idea, you know, no matter where you go, you can help find the same kid.

Steve 31:02

We'll share those resources. We'll share the links to everything, obviously, the website, but, I mean, I'll take my action items too, right? Go through the No Escape Room module. Follow you guys on, on the on the platforms, which is the easiest thing everybody can do and should do, and I hope everybody does and get involved. And if you're a business leader, an HR leader who is looking for ways to be more involved in your community and support people in your community, and, in fact, support children in your community, just get involved.

Gavin Portnoy 31:34

Thank you both so much for your time and for covering this important issue. Again, we're extremely thankful to get get the word out there, loud and proud. And you know, again, anybody that turns a hot spotlight on this is a friend of ours. So thank you!

Steve 31:46

I love it. Well, thank you, Gavin. We appreciate all the work you're doing and the team there. Thanks so much for taking the time. Trish, great stuff. You're a parent. I'm a parent. This really hits home for us, and I hope for a lot of our listeners too.

Trish 31:58

Even though it's obviously focused on children, I mean, it could even be older children, right? Children in college, children that are still maybe needing to learn some of these things. I plan on sharing it with all of the college age kids that are in my circle, just so that they can go take that training as well, because they will either need it currently or when they're ready to be parents. They'll be parents, right? So sure, yeah. I think also, if you have a student, please share it with them and have them go through the training.

Steve 32:25

Okay, I love the conversation, Gavin. We appreciate your time today. Great stuff. We'll share all the links to all the resources Gavin mentioned. And again, thank you so much. Great to see you, and thanks for joining us today. Trish, thank you. This has been a great show. I love what we're doing here at work, America in 2025 so we're going to keep it up all year long with great shows, great content, and to try to help make the world of work a better place, and really just help each other out, right? I think that's really the bottom line. So thank you. Thanks to our friends at Paychex and Workhuman for all their support. Thanks for listening. My name is Steve Boese, remember to subscribe anywhere you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening, and bye for now.

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