

"Don't talk to strangers" may be easy advice to give children, but it is just not enough in the age of social media, said social workers and MPs.

They called for more to be done to educate young people and parents on online risks after news that a Malaysian engineer, over a span of three years, abused 31 boys here.

"The current landscape is definitely insufficient to protect kids from such violations," said Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Social and Family Development.

Last Friday, 31-year-old Yap Weng Wah admitted to preying on 31 victims aged between 11 and 15. He has not been sentenced yet.

He sexually groomed the boys after befriending them on Facebook, and either sodomised or had oral sex with 30 of them. The acts took place at various locations, including flats in Woodlands, Yishun, Hougang and Changi, a Hotel 81 in Geylang, and swimming complexes in Hougang and Tampines, as well as Tampines Stadium.

Call to educate children, parents on online risks

The sexual assaults went undetected until one victim lodged a police report in June 2012. A raid at Yap's Yishun flat three months later uncovered more than 2,000 sex videos, including those involving him and young boys.

The case, described by the prosecution as the worst of its kind, has put the spotlight on sexual grooming and how children, fearing shame, stigma or being reprimanded, can keep silent about abuse.

Ms Phua said Singaporean children are "equipped with technical skills at a pace that does not match the need to discern and protect themselves".

According to a 2012 survey, Singaporean youth spend 5½ hours online daily.

School curriculum on the risks

MPs and social workers say more must be done after 'worst of its kind' sexual grooming case

of social media and sexual grooming needs to be strengthened, said Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Chua Chu Kang GRC MP and chairman of the GPC for Communications and Information.

Mr Chong Ee Jay, assistant manager at Touch Cyber Wellness, which provides internet safety training in schools, echoed the call.

He said it was important for educators and parents to keep up to date on the increasing plethora of online platforms used by young people.

"If we cannot stop children from meeting online friends, at

least teach them to tell someone about where they are going, or to bring a friend along," he added.

To show how easily children can fall into online traps, he spoke of a case in which a 13-year-old boy befriended someone he thought was a girl around his age.

Their online chats quickly grew "lovey dovey". "She" then asked for \$50 and, desperate to fulfil the request, he asked his parents for the money. They relented only after the boy agreed to meet in a public place and to have them observe from a distance. Instead of a young girl, a man in his 40s showed up.

"That's the tricky part because when it comes to online grooming, a lot of times, it starts off being very casual, to gain trust, before the chats turn into something else," said Mr Chong. Given that perpetrators often use fake identities, it becomes even harder for a child to understand what is really going on.

Yap typically contacted the boys using the identity of an 18-year-old polytechnic student. He gained their trust by portraying himself as an older brother or mentor, in some cases over weeks or months.

Mr Chong said in his nine years of training youth in cyber wellness, most do not tell their parents about questionable online experiences.

This is why parents must maintain close relationships with their children, and create an environ-

ment in which young people do not feel they will get reprimanded "for being cheated", he added.

Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng, chairman of the GPC for Culture, Community and Youth, added: "Such relationships must be built from young, so that children are comfortable with sharing their thoughts, experiences and problems."

Close ties allow parents to monitor the child's activities and relationships - including those forged online - without making it look like they are policing the child, said Mr Edwin Yim, director of the Asian Women's Welfare Association Family Services.

There are warning signs to look out for. Singapore Children's Society executive director Alfred Tan said these include children being very active online late at night, or receiving gifts they cannot afford.

Mr Yim said it is also important to reach out to children who are socially isolated and have trouble making friends, and who turn to the Internet to fill the void.

He said: "The kid who sits at the corner of the classroom who's the most quiet - sometimes, he's the one with the most problems."