

Grooming:

Protect Your Child from Sexual Predators



Frequently we hear horror stories in the news about children and adolescents being sexually abused or assaulted. Such stories cause fear and paranoia in parents about how they can keep their children safe from sexual predators. Becoming knowledgeable about the “grooming process” and recognizing the danger signs of “grooming” are the first steps in arming yourself with the information needed to calm your fears and protect your child from sexual predators.

What is “grooming”?

- A process of targeting a child and engaging him or her for the purpose of sexual activity.
- It involves an imbalance of power and elements of coercion and manipulation.
- It involves motivation and intent to sexually exploit the child.

Who is targeted?

Predators typically target children with obvious vulnerabilities:

- Unpopular
- Feel unloved
- Seeking attention and friendship
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence
- Isolated from peers
- Spend time alone
- Often unsupervised
- Experiencing family problems

How do predators approach intended victims?

- Typically present themselves positively to the child
- Exhibit interest in the child
- Are complimentary
- Learn the child’s habits, likes, dislikes
- Pretend to share common interest, backgrounds, experiences, etc.

What is the purpose of grooming?

- The perpetrator’s goal is to gradually increase access to the intended victim, eventually engage in sexual activity with him or her, and decrease the likelihood that the perpetrator’s actions will be discovered by others, including the victim.
- The perpetrator’s goal also is to make the potential victim feel comfortable enough to become close to and be alone with the perpetrator, and to keep the sexual activity a secret.

Grooming is a process that typically consists of the following steps:

1. Building Trust and Breaking Down a Child’s Defenses

- Pretend to share common interests, backgrounds, experiences, etc.
- Give gifts as tokens of friendship
- Play games
- Give rides
- Provide access to valuable items, privileges, or activities that are typically unavailable or off limits to the child
- Flatter and make the child feel special and somehow indebted

- Offer a sympathetic and understanding ear (e.g., “No one understands you like I do”; “I am here for you”; “I know what that’s like”, etc.)

2. Reassuring to the Family

- Strike up relationships with the child’s parents (single-parent families are prime targets)
- Attempt to gain trust or take advantage of the trust of the child’s parents or care providers
- Behave in exemplary ways to alleviate concerns or possible suspicions

3. Gradual Erosion of Boundaries

- Escalate inappropriate physical contact, such as:
 - Hugging or touching nonthreatening areas of body (e.g., hand holding, rubbing back, caressing hair, etc.)
 - Pretending to accidentally touch or brush up against the child
 - Positioning self in close proximity to the child (e.g., sleep in the same bed)
 - Engaging the child in nonsexual inappropriate behaviors (e.g., drinking alcohol)
 - Touching and fondling inappropriate areas of the child’s body

4. Construct Secrecy with the Child

- Make the child fearful that he or she will be in trouble if their activities together are discovered
- Tell the child that touching between them is good because their relationship is special
- Tell the child there will be consequences if he or she reports the sexual behavior (e.g., “We no longer can be friends”; “Your family will hate you”; etc.).

5. Working to Secure Compliance

- Escalate intrusiveness of sexual behaviors over time
- Manipulate child into performing or permitting a desired sex act
- Threaten to harm child or a person who is important to child if he or she does not comply

As a parent or caregiver who may be suspicious of possible grooming, the key is to look for patterns of behavior in both the suspected perpetrator and the suspected targeted victim that would suggest grooming is occurring. Also, look for power differences present in the suspected relationship. For example, is there an imbalance of power? Does the suspected victim appear to have been targeted by the individual in question? Is the child being manipulated by the suspected perpetrator? Additionally, ask yourself if the suspected perpetrator has gone out of his or her way to gain your trust as the parent/guardian/caregiver, or has behaved in exemplary ways to reassure you of his or her “good intentions.” These are crucial questions to ask to identify warning signs of sexual perpetration.

If you suspect your child is being groomed, immediately limit your child’s interactions with the individual in question. In a safe and supportive environment, engage your child in a conversation, using age-appropriate language, regarding his or her relationship and interactions with the individual. If you discover that your child has been sexually victimized, contact law enforcement authorities immediately for further action.

Final Comments

As a preventative measure, we recommend that you always pay attention to your child and the people in your child's life. Do not yield the responsibility of your child to others without carefully examining their character and intent. Parents should know their child's teachers, coaches, day care providers, youth group leaders, their friends' parents/caregivers, and other significant adults involved in their lives. Ask questions, and more questions, and more questions, if necessary. Stay involved and aware and make it a habit to make unannounced visits when your child is alone with others. These are the best parenting tips for protecting your child from sexual predators.

It is also critical that you talk to your child, using age-appropriate language, about appropriate and inappropriate touch and interactions with others (relatives and non-relatives; adults and other children/adolescents). Also teach your children to recognize grooming behavior. Most importantly, teach them to trust you with their problems and assure them through your actions and not just your words that they can always bring their problems and concerns to you anytime without penalty or criticism. These strategies and actions can often be challenging to implement, and may feel awkward at times. But is better to be awkward and safe now than sorry later.

