



GROOMING IN CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT

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WHAT IS GROOMING?

Grooming is the term used when an offender with sexual intent manipulates the victim into an inappropriate relationship, that is then maintained in secrecy. The process of beginning and continuing this relationship is very calculated, where the grooming sex offender will isolate the victim from peers. This is typically achieved by encouraging a sense that they are special to the child and providing a kind of attention that the child needs. This can happen online and in social, family, or professional circles.

HOW TO RECOGNISE GROOMING

The suspected offender may:

- Hold a position of power because of their: age, sexuality/gender, intellect, physical strength, powerful role in the community, friendship networks, economic or other resources.
- Not be known to the young person's social network.
- Be connected to people in the young person's network who are also victims of sexual exploitation.
- Be associated with other people who are known to have sexually exploited young people.

Parents and community (including friends) may be:

- Disconnected from the young person.
- Disconnected from the young person's friends.
- Labelling the young person as a 'slut' or 'promiscuous' or a 'problem'.
- Known to also be a victim of sexual exploitation (applies to friends only).
- Not aware of the young person's whereabouts.

The young person may show signs of sexual exploitation. Such as:

- Going missing for a period of time and returning home looking 'well kept'.
- Secrecy about their online activity or mobile phone use.
- A significant increase in the amount of time spent online or on their mobile phone.
- A change in temperament or increase in volatile behaviour, including an extreme array of mood swings or use of abusive language.
- Overtly adult sexual behaviour.
- Bruising, bite marks, or sexually transmitted infections.
- Being seen entering or leaving cars driven by unknown adults.
- Acquiring items such as money, clothes or mobile phones without an explanation.

The young person may have characteristics that put them at greater risk of exploitation. They may be:

- Involved in petty crime such as shoplifting or stealing.
- Experience hostile relationships with parents and other family members.
- Experiencing an unexpected loss or bereavement.
- Isolated from their friends.
- Detached from services including education, child protection residential care and youth services.
- Running away from home.
- Experiencing low self esteem, self harm, anxiety or depression.
- Using substances.

6 STAGES OF GROOMING

1. Targeting the victim:

- Offender will target a victim based on how vulnerable they appear.
- Desirable traits include emotional neediness, isolation and lower self-confidence.
- Children with less parental oversight are more desirable prey.

2. Gaining the victims trust:

- Offender begins by watching and gathering information about the child. Includes getting an idea of what the child's needs may be and deciding how to fill them.
- By appearing as genuinely warm and caring the offender will become involved with caretakers, rarely provoking suspicion, .

3. Filling a need:

- Once the offender begins to fill the child's needs, their importance in the child's life may become idealised by the child.
- Gifts, and extra attention and affection should raise concern treated with extra vigilance.

4. Isolating the child:

- The offender uses social relationship to create situations where they can be alone together.
- Isolation further reinforces the 'special connection' they have with the child. This can include babysitting, tutoring, coaching, and special trips together.

5. Sexualising the relationship:

- When sufficient emotional dependence and trust is created, the offender progressively sexualises the relationship.
- Desensitisation can occur through talking, photos, and creating situations for nudity, such as swimming together.
- The offender then exploits the child's natural curiosity, manipulating them to feel excited and extend the relationship in a sexual way.

6. Maintaining control:

- Once the sexual abuse is occurring, often secrecy and blame is used to maintain the child's participation and silence.
- The child feels threatened that if the relationship were to end, their emotional and material needs they now associate with the relationship will no longer be met.
- The child may feel that the loss of the relationship, and the consequences of exposing it, may be humiliating and be even more unwanted.

IMPACTS ON THE CHILD

The child's identity: The child learns quickly to link the feeling of emotional closeness to the abuse, creating feelings of confusion, isolation and distress.

Alienation: The offender may use tactics of secrecy to isolate and stigmatise the child, alienating them from people they may normally disclose to such as a parent or carer.

Self-blame: The child may blame themselves and believe they are at fault for the abuse. The child may feel that if they were to disclose, no one would believe them.



CARING FOR AT RISK CHILDREN

- Talk to children about healthy relationships.
- Show the child that you believe them by listening to what the child says.
- Be warm, open and approachable. Listen and show interest in what the child says.
- Use play to build connections with the child, this can help them open up.
- Try to remain calm and centred. This helps the child regulate and open up.

SELF-CARE

- It is normal to feel angry, guilty, helpless and scared. Don't beat yourself up.
- Talk to someone and seek help from a professional to support your wellbeing.
- Understand your own limits and capabilities.
- Take care of yourself. Go for a walk, read a book or spend time with friends.
- Join a support group.