

Grooming Behaviors

Becoming knowledgeable of the “grooming process” and recognizing the danger signs of grooming are the first steps in protecting your child from predators.

What is grooming?

- A process of conditioning used by child sexual offenders over time to get children to accept progressively more intrusive sexual acts.
- This process involves manipulating the child and the child’s caregivers to build trust so the child will be less likely to share the “secret” of sexual abuse.

What is the purpose of grooming?

- The predator’s goal is to create a victim by increasing access to the victim and decreasing the likelihood of the predator’s intent being discovered by others or the child.
- The predator’s goal is to make the victim feel comfortable enough to be close to and alone with the predator.
- The predator wants to make sure that the victim keeps the abuse a secret.

Who is targeted?

A predator typically will target a child with obvious vulnerabilities. The child might:

- Be unpopular
- Feel unloved
- Seek attention and friendship
- Have low self-esteem and lack confidence
- Be seen as unreliable or untrustworthy
- Spend a lot of time alone
- Often be left unsupervised
- Be experiencing family problems
- Not be educated about sex or sexual abuse

Grooming is a process that typically follows these steps:

1. Building trust and breaking down the child’s defenses. The predator might:
 - Pretend to share common interests and experiences
 - Give gifts as a sign of friendship
 - Flatter and make the child feel special
 - Make the child feel like he/she owes the predator something
 - Offer a sympathetic and understanding ear (i.e., “I’m here for you”, “I know what that’s like”, etc.)
 - Bribe the child with games, drugs, alcohol, sexually explicit materials or allow the child to get away with behavior that is otherwise considered inappropriate

2. Reassuring to the family. The predator might:
 - Strike up relationships with the parents of the child (single parents are targeted)
 - Attempt to gain trust or take advantage of the trust of the child's parents or caregivers
 - Behave as a model citizen to ease concerns or possible suspicions
 - Perform favors for the parents
3. Gradually break down boundaries. Inappropriate escalating physical contact, such as:
 - Hugging or touching non-threatening areas of the body (i.e., hand holding, rubbing back, caressing hair, wrestling, tickling, etc.)
 - Pretending to accidentally touch or brush up against a child
 - Positioning self in close proximity to the child (i.e., sleep in the same bed)
 - Engage the child in sexual or non-sexual inappropriate behaviors (i.e., drinking alcohol, telling "dirty" jokes, watching pornography)
 - Walking in on the child in the bathroom "accidentally"
 - Using situations like going to the bathroom or coming out of the shower to expose genitals to the child
 - Touching and fondling inappropriate areas of the body
4. Construct secrecy with the child. The predator might:
 - Introduce secrecy before sexual behaviors start (i.e., giving a gift but telling the child not tell his/her parents)
 - Escalate the intrusiveness of sexual behaviors over time
 - Manipulate the child into performing or permitting desired sexual acts
 - Make the child feel responsible for the abuse ("you wanted this or you wouldn't have kept hanging out with me")
 - Make the child fearful that he/she will be in trouble if their activities are discovered
 - Tell the child that touching between the child and predator is good; their relationship is special
 - Tell the child there will be consequences if the child reports these behaviors (i.e., "we can no longer be friends", "your family will hate you", "your family will be broken", etc.)
 - Tell the child that no one will believe the child if he/she tells
 - Tell the child that the predator will go to jail if the child tells
 - Withdraw affection from the child if the child threatens to tell
 - Threaten to harm the child or someone important to the child if he/she does not comply.

Who are child molesters?

Most children are abused by someone that is trusted and known to the child and family (i.e., sibling, parent, cousin, neighbor, family friend, etc.)

How can I protect my child?

- Educate your child about sex and sexual abuse. It is much harder to abuse a child that knows about appropriate boundaries.
- Do not expect your child to protect him/herself or that your child will tell you if something is happening.
- Tell your children that if something happened to them, it is not their fault.

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- Believe your child if he/she tells you that is something is happening that he/she does not like.
- Get to know the families of your child's friends.
- Be wary of older children or adults that want to spend a lot of time alone with your child.

When suspicious of possible grooming, the key is to look for patterns of behavior in both the suspected predator and the suspected targeted victim that would suggest grooming is occurring. Ask yourself if the suspected predator has gone out of their way to gain your trust as the caregiver, or has behaved in exemplary ways to reassure you of their "good intentions". These are crucial questions to ask to identify warning signs of grooming. If you suspect your child is being groomed, immediately limit your child's interactions with the individual in question.

If you have concerns that your child is being groomed or abused, call law enforcement or DHS.

(Adapted from Donna L. Stewart, Ph.D., Parenting.org, Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program and The Center for Behavioral Intervention)