

What is Grooming?

<https://bravehearts.org.au/about-child-sexual-abuse/what-is-grooming/>

Learn the signs of grooming and protect children from child sexual abuse.

Grooming describes the preparatory (or 'lead up') stage of child sexual abuse that offenders use to gain the trust and compliance of the child or young person (and those around them) and to establish secrecy and silence to avoid disclosure.

Grooming hides behind harmless. It is essential to understand that it is not just the child or young person that is groomed. Parents, caregivers and other significant adults (including organizations) can also be groomed by the person intending to sexually harm the child. This can make it challenging for parents and caretakers to establish if a child is being groomed, as grooming behaviors often look similar to genuine or caring behaviors.

Perpetrators are often seen as upstanding, likeable and charming, taking the time to build the trust of the child and adults around the child. This process can take weeks, months or even years, but the end goal is always the same – to gain unsupervised access to the child for the purpose of sexually abusing them and keeping them from disclosing.

Most offenders are known to the child and/or the family, with 79% of child sexual abuse survivors reporting they were abused by a relative, friend, acquaintance or neighbor (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019, as cited in National Office for Child Safety, 2021). Whilst most people are safe and do not pose a risk, we should be tuned into the behaviors of those who spend time with our children and learn to recognize behaviors that could be considered grooming 'red flags'.

Learn the signs: 'Red Flag' grooming behaviors

It can be difficult to detect sexual grooming because many grooming behaviors resemble normal adult-child interactions (Jeglic, Winters & Johnson, 2023). However, there are common patterns of behavior among offenders that may help us recognize when a child is potentially being groomed. While red flags may not necessarily mean a child is being groomed, being aware of these 'red flag' behaviors can help parents, caretakers and organizations interrupt and even prevent the grooming process.

Sexual Grooming Stages & Red Flags

1. **Victim Selection.** Perpetrators may seek out children who are:

- Compliant and trusting of adults
- Unconfident and lacking in self-esteem

- Lonely, isolated and/or lacking in adult supervision
- Have an intellectual impairment or personal care needs
- Not close to primary caregivers or the family unit

It is important to understand that ALL CHILDREN are at risk of being groomed or sexually abused, no matter their family circumstances, or cultural or socio-economic background.

2. Gaining Access and Isolation. Perpetrators may:

- Be involved in youth-serving organizations
- Manipulate family to gain access to the child
- Engage in activities alone with children and exclude adults
- Encourage and engage in overnight stays and/or outings with the child perhaps under the guise of helping families out
- Separate the child from peers and family

3. Trust Development. Perpetrators may:

- Be charming/nice/likeable
- Have 'insider' status/good reputation/be a 'pillar of the community'
- Be affectionate and loving
- Give the child special attention
- Show favoritism/have a 'special relationship' with the child
- Give compliments
- Spend time with child/communicate often
- Engage in childlike activities (e.g., stories, games, sports, music)
- Give rewards/privileges (e.g., gifts, toys, treats, money, trips)
- Provide drugs and/or alcohol to the child

4. Desensitization to Sexual Content and Physical Contact. Perpetrators may:

- Ask questions about the child's sexual knowledge/experiences/relationships
- Talk about sexual things they themselves have done
- Use inappropriate sexual language/tell dirty jokes
- Teach the child sexual 'education'
- Accidentally touch the child/use distraction while touching
- Watch the child undressing
- Expose their naked body to the child

- Show the child pornography
- Use 'innocent'/non-sexual contact
- Desensitize the child to touch/increase sexual touching

Post-Abuse Maintenance. Perpetrators may:

- Tell the child not to tell anyone what happened
- Encourage secrets
- Say things such as, "I love you/you're special"
- Use rewards/bribes/threats of punishment or harm
- Persuade the child it was acceptable/normal behavior
- Make the child feel responsible
- Use threats of abandonment/rejection/family breaking up

How grooming impacts victims. The manipulative nature of grooming can cause victims to experience ongoing thought distortions, self-identity issues, and feelings of isolation. Children who have been sexually groomed and/or abused may feel confused, scared and guilty. In some cases, victims may simultaneously feel a 'bond' with their abuser and feel protective of their relationship.

When a child is being sexually groomed, they may:

- Think they have a special relationship with the person who is grooming/harming them
- Feel confused over the nature of their relationship with the perpetrator
- Internalize the abuse as their fault/feel responsible for the abuse
- Fear they will be blamed, punished, or not believed if they disclose the abuse
- Fear that they will be separated from their family or home if they speak out
- Believe that disclosure will cause harm to someone or something they love and care for, such as family members or pets.

These complicated and often contradictory feelings, coupled with the fact that perpetrators are often beloved family members, close family friends, or authority figures, contribute to the victim's silence and unwillingness to disclose, sometimes even when asked directly if they have been harmed.

Protecting children from grooming and sexual abuse. Parents, caregivers and organizations can take proactive steps toward protecting children and young people from grooming and sexual abuse. If you are reading this, you have already taken one of the most important steps – learning more about the issue!