

Victim Grooming: Protect Your Child from Sexual Predators

<http://www.parenting.org/article/victim-grooming-protect-your-child-sexual-predators>

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Frequently we hear of horror stories in the news about children and adolescents being sexually abused or assaulted. Such stories cause fear and paranoia in parents when it comes to ensuring the safety of their children from sexual predators. Becoming knowledgeable of 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 identifying and engaging a child in 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
- Feels unloved
- Seeking attention and friendship
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence
- Isolated from peers
- Spends time alone
- Often unsupervised
- Experiencing family problems

How are victims approached by predators?

- Typically presents self positively to child.
- Exhibits interest in the child.
- Is complimentary.
- Learns child’s habits, likes, dislikes.
- Pretends to share common interest, backgrounds, experiences, etc.

What is the purpose of grooming?

- The perpetrators goal is to MAKE A VICTIM by increasing access to the victim and decreasing the likelihood of their intent being discovered by others, including the victim.
- The perpetrators goal is also to make the potential victim feel comfortable enough to be close with the offender, to be alone with the offender, and to keep the sexual behavior a secret.

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

1. Building Trust and Breaking Down 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 typically unavailable or off limits.
 - Flatter and make child feel special and somehow indebted.
 - Offer a sympathetic and understanding ear (i.e., "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 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
 - Inappropriate escalating physical contact, such as:
 - hugging or touching non-threatening areas of body (i.e., hand holding, rubbing back, caressing hair, etc.)
 - pretending to accidentally touch or brush up against child
 - positioning self in close proximity to child (i.e., sleep in the same bed)
 - engage child in non-sexual inappropriate behaviors (i.e., drinking alcohol)
 - touching and fondling inappropriate areas of the body
4. Construct Secrecy with Child
 - Make child fearful that he or she will be in trouble if their activities together are discovered.
 - Tell child that touching between them is good; their relationship is special.
 - Tell child there will be consequences if they report behavior (i.e., "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 desired sex act.
- Threaten to harm child or some person important to child if they do not comply

When 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 their way to gain your trust as the parent/guardian/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 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 their relationship and interactions with the individual. If you discover that your child has been sexually victimized contact legal authorities immediately for further action.

Final Comments:

As a preventative measure, it is recommended to 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 question of 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 needed. Stay involved and aware and make it a habit to make unannounced visits. These are the best strategies to protect 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 (relative and non-relatives; adults and other children/adolescents). Also teach your child 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 he can always bring his problems and concerns to you at any time without penalty or criticism. The above recommendations can be challenging to implement and at times may feel awkward, but it is better to be safe now than sorry later.