



Grooming

Grooming is when someone develops an emotional connection with a child for the purposes of sexual abuse or exploitation.

Grooming can happen online or offline, either by a stranger or by someone the child knows.

Many children do not understand that they have been groomed or that what has happened is abusive. They often falsely believe they are in a relationship with the offender.

HOW IT HAPPENS

Offenders will spend some time trying to gain the trust of the child until the child has formed an emotional attachment with them.

Part of developing trust may involve the offender attempting to isolate the young person from their family and friends in order to develop a sense of dependency by the young person towards the offender. Isolating the young person from their existing networks is a key tactic offenders use to exert power and control over their victims.

WHAT GROOMING MAY LOOK LIKE

Although no checklist for grooming behaviour exists, offenders have been known to utilise a number of strategies dependant on whether the grooming takes place online or offline.

Some common methodologies include:

- Offering advice and understanding
- Buying gifts
- Complementing the child and giving them lots of attention
- Sharing secrets

When this happens online, offenders can often easily discover lots of information about a child prior to establishing contact through viewing their social media profiles.

It is still true that offenders will try to develop trust by offering advice and understanding, however the added challenge with the online context is that they may involve pretending to be somebody they are not (for example, another young person of a similar age).

The intention of the offender is not always to meet the young person in the 'real world' for the purposes of sexual abuse; it is increasingly seen that offenders will groom young people online with the intention of obtaining sexual images that they can use to blackmail the child further. This sexual abuse takes place entirely online and the offender may never have the intention of meeting the young person (see sexual extortion guide).

WHEN A CHILD MAKES CONTACT DIRECTLY

Many children do not recognise the terminology 'grooming' nor recognise that what has happened to them as being abusive. Therefore it is important for you to avoid using language which may unintentionally hinder conversation or create barriers to disclosure.

Whilst recognising the importance of using accessible language to facilitate disclosure, it is essential for you to recognise that the victim's emotional attachment to the offender, as a result of the grooming process, means that it is unlikely a child will directly report 'grooming'. It is therefore probable that the young person will be experiencing considerable distress, for them to be reaching out for your support at this stage.

Be supportive and ask questions, looking out for them mentioning some of the grooming indicators highlighted above. Explain that your role is to ensure and prioritise the child's welfare, and in order to ensure that they are safe, you want to understand what has happened to determine how you can help. This will help you decide on the most appropriate response. Ask open questions to help understand why the child has made contact with you, such as "Tell me why you'd like to speak today" and offer continual reassurance that they have done the right thing by making contact.

You should try to determine how long the issue has been happening and whether they have disclosed the abuse to anybody else, whether it is a parent / carer, teacher, a friend or someone else. Determining this will help you identify the immediate level of risk towards the young person. If they have not spoken to anybody about this yet, determine whether there is anybody they can speak to. Reassure them that they have done the hardest thing by disclosing it once and explain that you can help them with talking to a trusted adult for example, you may wish to offer to speak with their trusted adult on their behalf.

You may find that the child is reluctant to disclose to anybody within their familiar support networks and this is not unusual. Many young people are worried about the consequences of disclosing and you can support them by explaining what is likely to happen if they speak to a trusted adult.

This will be different based on the circumstances of each case and depending on local legislation, however you should use this opportunity to explain the referral pathway appropriate to your country.

WHEN A PARENT / CARER MAKES CONTACT

Acknowledge that the parent will be experiencing a range of mixed emotions which is normal and understandable, however deliver the message that the parent needs to be able to channel any negative feelings in a way that is not directed at their child. Reassure the parent that their child is not to blame and support the parent in understanding their child has done nothing wrong. This is important as part of the grooming process, their child may have been made to feel culpable for the abuse.

Express how important it is that the parent listens to what their child is telling them in a non-judgemental manner and they are mindful of how they react to what they are being told. You must advise the parent to keep an open mind to the fact that they may not know the full picture of the abuse at this stage, so they should be prepared for potential further disclosures from their child and ensure they react and respond in a similar way.

If a parent has made contact with you because they suspect that their child has been a victim of grooming, or whether their child has already disclosed that they have a problem, there are a number of things that a parent can do in order to encourage their child to open up, which you may choose to share with parents:

- **Choose the moment carefully.** Do not make your child feel like they have been put on the spot.
- **Find a quiet place.** If your child has built up the courage to disclose a concern, the last thing that they want is to be disturbed.
- **Ask questions.** Try to be non-judgemental and allow your child the opportunity to answer. Try to keep the conversation flowing.
- **Reassure your child.** Tell your child that you believe them and that you are there to help them.

Reassure the parent that their child will be appropriately safeguarded by explaining the referral pathway relevant to your country but also advising the parent how they can pro-actively seek support for their child by signposting to the relevant support services available to the child.

It is important that you both highlight and clarify the emotional impact of such abuse on the child, as it will help the parent understand the importance of taking a supportive approach to their child. Ask the parent:

- Has there been any changes in their child's behaviour?
- Is their child currently involved with any statutory support services or have they been in the past?
- Do they have any concerns for the child's mental health currently or historically?

Gathering this information will help inform you of the urgency of any subsequent referral to the statutory support services. You should also ensure the parent is aware of any subsequent changes in their child's behaviour, even if there have been no visible changes reported by the parent to you at this stage.

PRACTICAL ADVICE:

You should advise that there are a number of steps that they can take in order to begin regaining control if they are worried that they may be being groomed online. They can:

- **Ask the person to stop.** Encourage young people to feel confident to speak up if they don't feel comfortable continuing a conversation online.
- **Report the individual.** If the groomer persists or is encouraging the young person to share nude images of themselves, then they can



contact the site(s) directly via their Safety Centre where members of the public can report abuse. Grooming behaviour can be closely linked with sexual extortion / blackmail and individuals can report those who have sent them a sexual message / image or asked for a sexual message / image. Some social media services and apps have high priority public reporting forms for this, so that the report is rapidly escalated and prioritised.

- **Tell an adult they trust.** Always encourage young people to speak to a trusted adult. If they don't feel comfortable doing this, you could offer to speak to their trusted adult on their behalf.
- **Gather information.** The child / parent should try to safely gather as much information as possible about the abuser – once a report has been made, this information will help law enforcement to take action against the abuser and protect the child. Try to record dates, times, usernames and the websites / apps used.

GROOMING – PROACTIVE PRACTICAL ADVICE:

Although most contacts will be reactive, the following advice may be useful to weave into some discussions, as appropriate:

- Offenders often look for and target young people who use a provocative or flirtatious username, post provocative pictures or talk about sex online. Young people should think about how their online profile makes them appear to others.
- Keep private information private. Young people shouldn't share details like phone number, address or school with someone they've only met online.
- Anything shared with a stranger online quickly becomes out of their control. Sending naked pictures or doing embarrassing things on webcam can be shared anywhere and with anyone.
- It is never a good idea to share your location or meet up with someone you've only met online. But if a young person decides to meet up, stay in a public place and take a trusted adult.
- If they don't know who they are and they say they're a 'friend of a friend', don't be afraid to ask the friend if they've ever met them in the real world. It's easy for someone to post fake photos or learn about you and your friends from existing information online.

RED FLAGS:

- The young person has arranged to meet the offender in person.
- The young person and offender have already met and, as a result, contact sexual abuse against the young person has occurred.
- Suspected sexual abuse has occurred but a disclosure by the young person is not forthcoming.
- Offender has access to sensitive content (e.g. sexual images of the young person) and / or information (e.g. home address) about the child which could lead to rapid escalation of the situation, including sexual extortion, potentially placing the young person at risk of abuse.
- Family member is the offender.
- Both the young person and their family have been groomed.
- Signs of self-harm and / or a change in the young person's behaviour (e.g. more secretive, withdrawn).

In the case of red flag issues emerging during your conversation, follow your standard escalation processes for intervention by law enforcement, child protection services, and so on, as appropriate.

