

Grooming

Digital Exploitation of Children



WHAT IS GROOMING?

The term "**Grooming**" describes **deliberate actions** aimed at **manipulating** and **controlling** a child, along with their family, relatives, caregivers, and support networks, as well as organizations, **to facilitate the act of child sexual abuse.**



Mechanics - Multi Target Grooming

Individual Grooming:

- *Building a specialized bond with the child through gifts, attention, or shared "secrets" to create dependency and emotional confusion.*

Family/Caregiver Grooming:

- *Gaining the trust of parents or guardians by being helpful, reliable, or becoming a "mentor" figure.*
- *This lowers the parents' guard and may lead them to grant the offender unsupervised access.*



Mechanics - Multi Target Grooming

Organizational Grooming:

- *In settings like schools, sports clubs, or religious groups, the offender often seeks positions of authority or becomes the "star volunteer."*
- *They use their reputation to silence potential critics and exploit weaknesses in the organization's safeguarding policies.*

Peer to Peer Grooming:

- *Grooming does not always require a large age gap. It can involve children and young people who would use manipulative and controlling techniques based on their social status, physical strength and emotional maturity to establish trust and control over their peers to facilitate sexual exploitation.*
- *Victims who have been groomed are sometimes forced to "recruit" their own friends to avoid further abuse on themselves.*



GOALS OF A 'GROOMER'

- To gain access to the child.
- To lower the child's inhibitions and resistance.
- To ensure the child's silence after the abuse.
- To insulate themselves from suspicion by the child's support network.

Grooming is not an event; it is a gradual process.

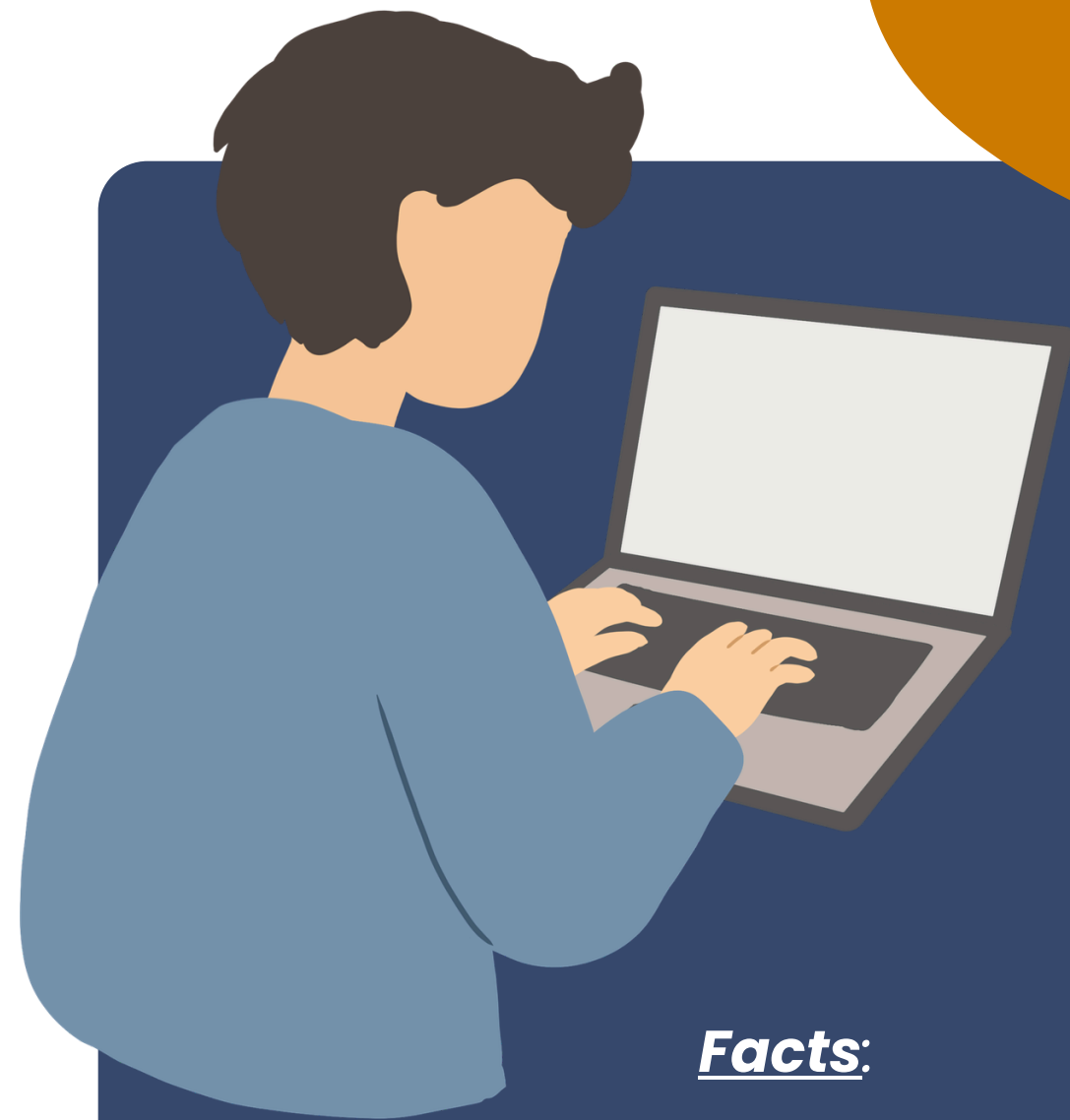


SOCIAL INSULATION - WHY ITS IMPORTANT

When an offender skillfully manipulates the support network, they create **social insulation**. This results in:

- **Isolation:** The child may feel unable to approach their parents, as the parents appear to "love" or "trust" the offender excessively.
- **Normalization:** Boundaries are gradually pushed, leading to inappropriate behavior being perceived as "just their personality" or "simply being friendly."
- **Discrediting:** If the child attempts to report the situation, the offender has already built a "perfect" reputation, causing the child's claims to be dismissed as misunderstandings or lies.





Facts:

- *Groomers often show a pattern of unnecessary, excessive touch, i.e. back patting, massaging shoulders*
- *Approximately 80% of groomers utilise "disappearing messages"*
- *40% of groomers are known to the victim in person*

Tactics of a Groomer

- **Phase 1: Targeting and Profiling:** Identifying vulnerable children or those with specific interests that the groomer can "bond" over.
- **Phase 2: Gaining Access:** Positioning themselves as a mentor, coach, or helpful family friend to bypass adult supervision.
- **Phase 3: The "Special" Relationship:** Using gifts, excessive attention, or shared "secrets" to make the child feel unique and mature.
- **Phase 4: Testing Boundaries:** Gradually shifting from appropriate to inappropriate topics or physical contact to gauge the child's reaction.
- **Phase 5: Isolation:** Creating a "us vs. them" mentality, making the child believe their parents won't understand or will be angry if they tell the truth.



FACTS:

- *Perpetrators typically spend 1 to 3 months building trust before making a sexual request*
- *There are an estimated 500,000 online predators active each day*
- *Children between ages 12 to 15 are most susceptible to being groomed and manipulated by adults online*

How it starts...

1. **The child is targeted** – children that are socially isolated or part of marginalised social, economic, racial or cultural group are often more targeted and vulnerable
2. **Building trust** – perpetrators will start by giving special attention, compliments or gifts/money
3. **Isolation** – perpetrators will practice progressive isolation of the child from supportive family or friends, telling them **“adults won’t understand”**
4. **Sexualization** – perpetrators will gradually introduce sexualized content and then encourage the child to produce the same
5. **Control** – perpetrators use secrecy, shame, blame, coercion and threats to maintain control and silence over their victims

ONLINE VS OFFLINE

	Offline Grooming	Online Grooming
Primary Method	Physical presence, volunteering, "helping" parents.	Social media, gaming platforms, direct messaging allow groomers access to children to stalk them online.
Pace	Often slower; relies on physical opportunities.	Can be accelerated due to constant digital access.
Anonymity	Difficult; the offender is usually known to the victim.	High use of fake personas via fake accounts.
Red Flag	Offering to take the child on solo outings.	Encouraging the child to move to private/encrypted apps.



RED FLAGS: BEHAVIORAL SHIFTS IN THE GROOMER

- **"Hero" behavior:** Always being the one to volunteer or stay late.
- **Creating "exceptions":** Treating one child differently than others (special privileges).
- **Boundary-crossing:** Contacting a child directly via personal social media or text without involving parents.



Warning Signs to Watch for in Your Child

- **Abrupt changes in behavior:** Signs may include emotional distress, irritability, and anxiety.
- **Sleep disturbances:** Nightmares, or regressive behavior such as bedwetting in youth may resurface.
- **Unfamiliar friends and unexpected gifts:** This could involve new acquaintances and unexplained money or presents received.
- **Heightened secrecy:** Be mindful of excessive privacy regarding online activities, phone usage, and social media interactions.
- **Extreme fatigue and withdrawal:** Noticeable tiredness and a lack of engagement with school, friends, and family may be present. Sudden loss of interest in hobbies.



Prevention Measures & Actionable Steps

The "Rule of Three"

- Ensuring no adult is ever alone with a child; always maintaining a line of sight or a third person.

The "No Secrets" Policy

- Encourage open communication with your children.
- Teach children that adults should never ask them to keep secrets from their parents.
- Learn about your children's interests and who their friends are

Digital Supervision

- Implementing "open-door" policies for device use and knowing which platforms children are using.
- Apply privacy settings on your children's devices





Prevention Measures & Actionable Steps Cont...

Reality & Boundaries

- Engage your children in conversations about online dangers; **do not shield them from reality.**
- Educate them about the importance of boundaries and respect.

Empower Your Children

- Encourage your children to voice their concerns when something feels amiss.
- Ensure they understand that they should never feel obligated to do anything that makes them uncomfortable.

Facts:

- Only 1 in 10 children inform a parent about grooming encounters.
- 45% of children confide in friends about grooming before adults.
- 40% of children disable privacy settings on social media to gain followers.
- 89% of sexual advances towards children occur in chatrooms or via messaging.

Activities You Can Practice With Your Child

Activity 1: Discussion Prompts



- *What are your favorite games to play online? Who do you talk to?*
- *Have you ever met someone "new" in a game or on a social app?*
- *How do you know if someone you meet online is actually who they say they are?*

Activity 2: “What should you do?”



- *You are playing a game, and a new "friend" offers you a gift but asks for your home address to send it.*
- *Someone you know only online asks you to keep a conversation "secret" from your parents.*
- *A person in your game chat says, "Your parents are too strict, you can tell me anything."*

Useful Tips for Kids:

- **Trust Your Gut.** *If a conversation feels weird, scary, or uncomfortable, stop.*
- **Tell a Safe Adult.** *Immediately tell a parent, guardian, or teacher what is happening.*
- **Don't Believe Threats.** *The Tricky Person's threats are lies. A safe adult will help you.*



QUIZ TIME!!

Question 1:

Which of the following is not a common goal of a groomer?

- A. Gain access to a child
- B. Lower a child's resistance
- C. Encourage children to report when they feel threatened
- D. Keep the abuse a secret

Question 2:

Grooming can involve which of the following?

- A. Building trust with parents
- B. Becoming a mentor or a volunteer
- C. Sending gifts or money
- D. Creating shared secrets with a child

Answer: C: The groomer would use manipulative tactics to make the victim feel responsible for their interactions, hence making the victim feel too much shame or guilt to come forward. They also isolate the victim by positioning themselves as the only person the victim can rely on without judgement.

Answer: All of the above : Groomers often manipulate children, families and organisations to gain trust and access. 90% of groomers use emotional validation as their primary weapon of control.

QUIZ TIME!!

Question 3:

Scenario: A coach gives one child special attention, extra gifts, and private training sessions. He often messages the child privately and says:

"You're more talented than the others. This is our little secret."

What warning signs are present?

- A. Special privileges
- B. Isolation
- C. Secret-keeping
- D. All of the above

Answer: D: The secrecy which connects the relationship between the groomer and the victim eventually leads to a power imbalance that allows for the abusive behaviours to continue.

Question 4:

Scenario: A teenager meets someone online in a gaming platform who quickly asks them to move to a private encrypted messaging app.

This type of behaviour should be considered as?

- A. Normal online behavior
- B. A red flag for possible grooming
- C. A safe way to communicate
- D. A common gaming feature

Answer B: Encouraging communication on private apps is a major grooming red flag.

QUIZ TIME!!

Question 5:

Which behaviour could indicate a child is being groomed?

- A. Sudden secrecy about their phone
- B. Receiving unexplained gifts
- C. Withdrawal from family and friends
- D. All of the above

Question 6:

Which behaviour might indicate a groomer?

- A. Always volunteering to supervise children
- B. Being overly physical with children
- C. Love bombs one "special" child
- D. All of the above

Answer: D: Sudden erratic behaviour and mood changes are common signs of emotional distress and grooming.

Answer: All of the above: Groomers often show a pattern of unnecessary touch and find excuses to spend time alone with the child/children. They also tend to show that they can emotionally identify with young people.



Need help?

This is how you can report:

Contact the **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)**

- CyberTipline at : **1-800-843-5678**
- Online CyberTipline at :
<https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>

For any immediate safety threats:

- call **911**
- local law enforcement
- State Protective Services