



Grooming is the name given to the process in which abusive adults identify, engage and prepare a child for sexual abuse. Not all child sexual abuse starts with a sexual assault and the process of grooming can begin weeks, months or even years before anything which can be classed as a sexual act takes place.

Grooming may begin with the targeting of a child's family. This is often characterised by the befriending of single or two-parent families, or by applying for positions as babysitters, tutors, etc. Similarly, more than one child may be groomed at a time. Abusers often look for vulnerabilities, such as children who lack attention or affection from their primary caregivers. Sometimes they may target a specific child who has particular desired characteristics, such as being of a particular age, personality or physical appearance.

Once a child has been identified, the abuser will offer to treat them in a way they have identified as conducive to grooming them. Child abusers are usually extremely knowledgeable about children's interests - current bands, music, TV programmes, movies, videos, computer games, fashion, books and magazines, popular activities, drinks and food. They speak the language of children, know current terminology and will show a real interest in children's interests in order to engage the child and gain their trust.

Abusers will then attempt to separate the child from other adults, creating a 'special' relationship where they do 'special' things. They are often very willing to engage in activities that parents are less willing to, such as playing computer games for hours on end, buying them gifts, allowing them to drink and eat forbidden food, and allowing them to swear, watch programmes and films they are normally not allowed to watch, play fight or stay up late. This is used not only to befriend but also to seduce the child into keeping things secret - 'I won't tell, if you don't tell.' They may denigrate the parents by telling the child that their parents are not interested in them in the special way that (s)he is.

The physical side of the abuse will begin slowly. The abuser may show the child affection, giving them hugs and cuddles which gradually become more and more sexualised. Pornography is also widely used in grooming, particularly with young boys, to demonstrate to the child that other children do this and that it is okay to be sexual with a 'special' friend. Pornography also desensitises the child and becomes an aid to what is expected of them sexually. Girls are usually engaged by abusers who call them 'special' or tell them that they understand how the child thinks and feels, grooming them into believing that they are a good friend or a special boyfriend.

Throughout this process the child abuser is testing the child to see whether they will reveal to the parents what they do together. A lot of grooming now is taking place over the internet. It follows the same procedure as above, however can be harder to identify as abusers are often posing as children themselves in order to gain other children's trust and friendship.

The process of grooming is gradual and subtle. The child becomes dependent and craves this 'special' friendship. As the child has already engaged in secrets it becomes hard to reveal the sexual secrets. The abuser plays on this by reminding the child of all the other



'secrets', threatening to reveal them to child's parents, or threatening to terminate their 'special' friendship. The child may continue to spend time with the abuser not for the sexual components of the 'friendship' but because the child is afraid of the consequences if they fail to comply. Many approaches to keep a child silent will be used, from threats to bribes, to saying that it was the child who willingly participated or encouraged the abuse, psychologically dismantling the child's willingness to tell someone. Guilt plays a huge part in keeping the silence as some children may enjoy the feeling of being 'special' and believe that they are the only one that the abuser loves. This could not be further from the truth; abusers 'love' as many children as they are able to get away with abusing and this is just a way of making the child feel guilty for stopping the abuse.

Children are not emotionally intelligent enough to understand the manipulation that is happening to them and may not even have the words to express how they feel about the physicality of the abuse. In some cases the touching will be gentle and the child's body may respond to the touch at the time, but afterwards they feel completely the opposite. This is so confusing for children who are not aware of how their bodies work and do not realise that reacting to physical stimulus is natural, so believe that they must be enjoying it.

It must be understood that a child is intellectually no match for a practiced child abuser. A child must NEVER be blamed for being manipulated by one and not telling anyone at the time. Nor should a caring adult blame themselves for 'allowing' this to happen to a child. It is not anyone else's fault that this happens to children, other than the abuser.

Because child abusers are so adept at manipulating or grooming children, the best way to protect your child from any kind of abuse is to maintain open communication. Make sure your child knows that they will not get into trouble if they tell you something they have done that they think may be 'bad' and make sure that you show this in your actions (e.g. do not punish them for mistakes). Talk to them about their right to their own bodies, teach them about good and harmful 'affection', and let them know that secrets which hurt them are not good secrets to keep. Be aware of who has access to your child without your supervision and who actively seeks this kind of access. Talk to them about some of the dangers of the internet and make sure they know that they should never physically meet someone they have met online without letting you know what they are doing first.

Above all, establish a trusting, loving bond between yourself and your child that cannot be broken by another adult and TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS! If something doesn't seem right, talk to your child about it in a non-confrontational, caring way.

If you need any more information about grooming or child sexual abuse, please call our helpline on **0808 802 9999** between 12-2.30 and 7-9.30pm every day of the year.

For support services for parents and carers of sexually abused children contact **MOSAC** (Mothers of Sexually Abused Children) on **0800 980 1958**. If you are concerned about another adult's behaviour towards children, contact **Stop It Now** on **0808 1000 900**.