

Protect your child from Sexual Harm

A FACT SHEET ON SEXUAL GROOMING

A lot of information exists about how to respond to sexual abuse once it has been discovered. But the best way of protecting children from harm is to be aware of the behaviours that can lead to sexual abuse before it occurs. These behaviours are called 'grooming'. By learning about the strategies used to 'groom' children and their families and recognising them as inappropriate behaviours in your family you create an environment that will deter being targeted by sexual abusers¹.

Sexual abuse thrives in secrecy and ignorance. By being alert to potential danger signs, we are better able to understand the steps we can take to keep children as safe as possible.

What is "Grooming"?

Sexual abusers are often people we know; more than 8 out of 10 children² who are sexually abused know their abuser. They may hold responsible positions in their local community, and can be personable or charismatic. Abusers come from all classes, ethnic and religious backgrounds and may be heterosexual or homosexual. Whilst a high percentage of abusers are men, some are also women³. You cannot pick an abuser out in a crowd, however you can identify behavior that precipitates abuse. This behaviour is known as 'grooming' and research shows us that it can occur for up to 12 months before the actual sexual abuse take place⁴.

Grooming is defined as communication with a child where this is an intention to meet and commit a sex offence⁵. More generally it can be seen as the process by which an individual manipulates those around them – particularly, but not exclusively, the child – to provide opportunities to abuse and reduce the likelihood of being reported or discovered.

Research suggests that this process can be very deliberate, and while it can occur over a long period of time, sometimes this period of time is much shorter; there may not be any conscious motivation to sexually abuse a child until just before the abuse occurs. In both cases, there are often opportunities to observe and intervene, even before the would-be abuser is fully aware of what may become sexual intentions.

Unfortunately, identifying sexual grooming of children isn't always straightforward. Sometimes sexual abuse occurs as part of a pre-existing relationship in which there is genuine affection, which makes it a complex issue. But there are often clear signs that can be detected before the abuse occurs.

1 Wortley and Smallbone 2006

2 (ABS, 1996, 2004a)

3 Pritchard, 2004

4 Wortley and Smallbone 2000

5 Understanding the Grooming or Entrapment Process, CPSU briefings

How Do People Groom Children for Sexual Abuse?

- **By getting close to children** – child sex offenders will often seek out adults and groom them in order to get access to their children. The sex offender can create a relationship built on trust or dependency and gain access to the children through it. Some befriend parents or carers who are facing difficulties or who are vulnerable themselves.
- **By silencing children** – people who want to sexually abuse children may:
 - offer them gifts or treats, and sometimes combine these with threats about what will happen if the child says 'no' or tells someone
 - threaten them with exclusion from their peer group or loss of favour if they do not comply
 - make the child afraid of being hurt physically, or threaten what may happen to other people if the child tells
 - play on the child's embarrassment or guilt about what is happening, perhaps convincing them that no one will believe them
 - make the child believe he or she wanted it to happen.

Signs An Adult May Be Grooming a Child for Sexual Abuse:

There may be cause for concern about the behavior of an adult or young person if they:

1. Exhibit frequent physical affection such as kissing, hugging, stroking hair or wrestling even when the child clearly does not want it or it is not required.
2. Encourage child or particular children to sit on their lap and offer regular physical comfort or reassurance to a particular child without a recognised cause.
3. Seek out opportunities to be alone with a child with no interruptions.
4. Spend most of their spare time with children and have little interest in spending time with people their own age.
5. Solicit invitations to sports, events or parties where a child will be.
6. Frequently arrive uninvited to places where the child or their family will be in a series of 'coincidences'.
7. Spend a lot of time around places like arcades, playgrounds, parks and sports venues to get to know children so they are not seen as strangers.
8. Regularly offer support to the family members of the child such as offering to babysit children for free, transport children to events, help out at social occasions involving the child or take children on outings alone.
9. Offer to drive children home or collect children from events on a regular basis.
10. Frequently walk in on children in the bathroom or their bedrooms.
11. Treat a particular child or group of children as favoured, making them feel special compared with others in a group.

12. Find out as much as possible about the child and use that information to engage the child and drive a wedge between the child and any protective adults, eg parents, teachers or coaches.
13. Purchase gifts or collect items of interest regularly for a specific child or group of children.
14. Tell secrets to a child and encourage the keeping of secrets.
15. Display ambiguous sexual behaviour, eg showing the child pictures of other children wearing swimsuits or less.
16. Display clearly inappropriate sexual behaviour, eg showing the child pornographic pictures, using explicit sexual language around children.

What Can I Do as a Parent or Carer?

Children often will not be aware that they are being groomed and may find it very difficult to tell anyone of any sexual advances made to them. They often feel trapped before they know what has happened. Parents can help protect children in their care by:

- Educating everyone in the family .
- Being alert to anyone positioning themselves in close proximity to the child, particularly in 'private' spaces, eg spending time in the child's room, sitting on the child's bed, etc
- Knowing what strategies sex offenders use to 'groom' children and families.
- Being aware of who is paying attention to your child and who their friends are. Don't ignore any unease you feel about people showing interest in your child or your family members.
- Paying attention to what adults or other children, eg siblings or friends of the child, are saying about the child's relationship with an adult or older child, eg 'He always gets Johnny to sit on his lap'.
- Being alert to any signs of 'grooming' by another adult or child and challenging it and reporting it to the authorities or a trusted health professional.
- Recognising that a child matures, boundaries within the home may need to change as well (eg knock on the door before entering the room of an adolescent)
- Recognising that if someone is 'too good to be true' then ask more questions – this friend or family member may not be a safe person for your child. Unfortunately, unconditional trust cannot protect children from harm.
- Never ignore a 'gut feeling' that something is wrong or not quite right – and do seek confidential advice and support. The NSW Child Protection Hotline is available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week and staffed by trained professionals. Contact them on 132 111.

KEY POINTS

- Child sexual abuse thrives in secrecy.
- People who abuse children may spend up to 12 months 'grooming' a child before they commit a sexual act with them⁷. However the period of time spent grooming can also be short, with the impulse occurring not long before the abuse happens.
- People do not just 'groom' children, they also 'groom' the adults around them.
- Environments that have defined boundaries in regards to appropriate behavior are less likely to attract sexual abusers⁸.
- Identification of sexual grooming of children can be a complex issue. The challenge is to be vigilant without creating a siege mentality.
- Identification of sexual grooming of children in care centres can be a complex issue. The challenge is to be vigilant without creating a siege mentality.
- Always seek advice and discuss your concerns with a trusted professional.

7 Child Sexual Abuse in Queensland: Offender Characteristics and Modus Operandi

8 Understanding the Grooming or Entrapment Process, CPSU briefings

References

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Child Sexual Abuse in Queensland: Offender Characteristics and Modus Operandi, report prepared by Stephen Smallbone and Richard Wortley, Griffith University, for the Queensland Crime Commission and the Criminology Research Council, 2000

Understanding the Grooming or Entrapment Process, CPSU briefings:
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/cpsu/resources/briefings/understanding_grooming_entrainment_process_wdf77040.pdf

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