

## Grooming and predatory behaviour

### What is grooming?

Grooming is the criminal activity of becoming friends with a child in order to persuade the child to enter into a sexual relationship.

### Who do predators target?

They will target children they perceive as vulnerable, such as children with low self-esteem or being bullied.

Regardless of the medium of contact, predators aim to gain power over the child so that they feel dependent on the contact.

Through compliments, gifts and 'a special friendship' they become someone the child trusts and enjoys spending time with.

### Why don't children tell?

Even when this may develop into something the child is uncomfortable with, they often feel unable to tell anyone because they were a willing participant in the relationship.

To prevent the child speaking to others many offenders also tell them that they (the offender) will go to jail or get in trouble.

Furthermore they may fear the repercussions of telling someone, worried about 'getting in trouble' for what had happened, or hold concerns about being believed or accused of 'telling tales'.

### Online grooming

*How children might encounter sexual predators online:*

- Gaming websites, especially those with chat and/or personal messaging functions
- Social Networks (e.g. Facebook, Tumblr, twitter) and Chatrooms

*Why the internet can be dangerous for children:*

- The computer or device is often away from adult/parental supervision
- Predators can assume a false identity i.e. approaches the child as a peer or celebrity
- Predators can create a relationship and build trust
- Children are often reluctant to discuss what happens (fears of repercussions e.g. loss of internet access)

*The predator may aim to:*

- Meet the child in person
- Persuade the child to send explicit images

Children may not know what's appropriate to be shared online or understand the nature of digital images.

*How to protect against online grooming:*

- Know what your children are doing online
- Explain and set boundaries for what information is appropriate to share and with whom
- Set up internet filters and blockers to prevent access to certain websites and content
- Have the computer in an open family space, rather than the child's bedroom



*Illustration 1: How predators groom children*

## Face to face grooming

Predators aim to gain the trust of the child and often their family too. A recent survey of child sexual offenders found in >70% of cases the parents knew the offender was spending time with the child (Smallbone).

*This might happen through:*

- Buying unexpected gifts/presents
- Giving the child extra attention and playing with them
- Offering advice or empathy to the child
- Using a professional position or reputation

*As the trust and relationship develops they may go on to:*

- Seek time alone with the child (e.g. babysitting)
- Touch the child non-sexually
- Encourage the child to share their bed

## Child sexual predator warning signs

- Pay more attention to children when in a groups of children and adults.
- Need for power and control
- Deviant sexual behaviour and attitudes
- Often married or in relationships
- Not always strangers, often family members, family friends and neighbours
- Good manipulators (seduction is an integral part)
- Users of various kinds of pornography
- Great helpers —prey on people in need, when they can insinuate themselves in your life
- Use stressful or vulnerable situations to get close to the victim by providing assistance
- Notoriously friendly, nice, kind, engaging and likeable.
- Single out a child or a few children to be alone with them
- Give children gifts or money
- Are overly physical with children - hugging, tickling, and handling children
- Talk to children about inappropriate topics, their bodies, sexual topics
- Offer to babysit, tutor or play with children - especially if they don't have kids
- Contact children via text, phone, Facebook etc.
- Share their personal information with children

## Protective behaviours to teach your children

You can start teaching children as young as 2-3 years of age about their bodies and personal boundaries.

**Naming body parts** - When in the bath or dressing, use proper names for body parts. Explain that certain parts are private – “they are for you and no one else”. Rather than saying “don't let anyone touch your private parts”, you should phrase it “you should tell me if anyone touches your private parts” to ensure your child is not scared they will get in trouble if they are assaulted. Describe the situations where showing your private parts or having them touched is ok, such as *cleaning* or being *healthy* (e.g. going to the doctor).

**Secrets** – Explain that there are secrets and surprises. Surprises have a happy ending and everyone will find out about it at some time (like a surprise party). There are also bad secrets, which make you feel sad and uncomfortable. Tell your child that they always need to tell you bad secrets, even if the person telling them the secret asks them not to. Another approach is telling your child that secrets are still kept secret if they tell mum or dad. Use examples to test your child's understanding.

**Safe and not safe touches** (safe and not safe is used instead of the terms good and bad to avoid confusion e.g. getting a vaccination at the doctor is bad, but safe) – Explain that not safe touches are the touches to your private parts or those that make you feel mad, upset and confused. It is important to explain to your child that it could be someone that they know and like touching them, but if it is an unsafe touch, they should still tell you. Reinforce that they will never get in trouble for telling you someone touched them.

Use examples to test your child's understanding.

**Adults aren't always right** – Tell your child that some adults can do wrong things, so if an adult tells you to do something that you don't want to do, or touches you in a not safe way, you can say NO or STOP.

**Trust your instincts** – Reinforce that if your child ever has a bad feeling about the way someone is touching or treating them, that they should try and get out of the situation and tell their parents.

**Myths and facts about sexual predators**

<i>Myths</i>	<i>Facts</i>
Most sexual assaults are committed by strangers, in places like schoolyards and playgrounds.	Most sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim or the victim's family. Often the abuse happens in the victim or predators own home.
All sex offenders are male and only girls are victims of sexual abuse	The vast majority of sex offenders are male. However, females also commit sexual crimes. Boys and girls of all ages can be victims of sexual abuse.
Sex offenders commit sexual crimes because they are under the influence of alcohol, mentally ill or are 'dirty old men'.	Offenders are generally from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and the majority are not suffering from any mental illness. While drugs and alcohol are often involved in sexual assaults, it is more common that the victim may be under the influence of alcohol to increase their vulnerability.
Youths do not commit sex offenses.	Adolescents are responsible for a significant number of rape and child molestation cases each year.
Child sexual abuse only occurs in dysfunctional families.	Sexual abuse can occur in all family types, cultures and classes.
Victims of child sexual abuse grow up to be adult sex offenders.	This is not the case. Multiple factors, not just sexual victimisation as a child, are associated with the development of sexually offending behaviour in youth.
Most child sexual abusers use physical force or threat to gain compliance from their victims.	In the majority of cases, abusers gain access to their victims through deception and enticement.
If a child does not tell anyone about the abuse, it is because he/she must have consented to it.	Children often do not tell for a variety of reasons including the offender's threats to hurt or kill someone the victim loves, as well as shame, embarrassment, wanting to protect the offender, fear of being held responsible or being punished, fear of being disbelieved, and fear of losing the offender who may be very important to the child or the child's family.
Reporting sexual abuse can cause more harm to the victim.	If abuse is not reported, it is more likely that it will continue happening at the child will be more at risk. It also helps the victim to talk about the abuse. The victim's recovery will be enhanced if she or he feels believed, supported, protected, and receives counselling following the disclosure that s/he was assaulted.
Victims of sexual assault are often partly to blame for the assault because they are seductive.	Victims of sexual abuse are NEVER to blame for the assault, regardless of their behaviour. Victims are often made to feel like willing participants, which further contributes to their shame and guilt.
If a victim does not say "no" it is not sexual assault.	Sexual assault victims may not say "no" or not fight back for a variety of reasons including fear and confusion.
Children lie about sexual abuse	More than 94% of child abuse cases reported are confirmed by independent investigations.

## References

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