

Grooming Awareness Guide

April 2025

What is Grooming

Grooming is what we call the practice of adult men and women who build a connection with a child (anyone under the age of 18 years), with the goal of exploiting them. The exploitation is normally sexual in nature.

The groomer is willing to spend a lot of time, effort and sometimes money in building a relationship with a child. Grooming is very difficult for children to spot, because in the early stages, it just looks like friendly or kind or generous behaviour. This can be especially difficult for children who may have been or are being neglected or abused. An adult showing interest and care towards a child who feels not seen or unworthy will bond the child to that adult.

Gradually over time, the groomer has got the child to lower their defences and reshape what the child knows to be right and wrong and what they are comfortable with to the point where abuse can start to happen. This can be so gradual and slow that the child does not realise that they are being abused.

Boys and girls can be victims of grooming. Men and women can be guilty of grooming children.

Why is this a Problem for Children

Grooming is a predatory behaviour used by adults who wish to exploit children for their own benefit. There is no real regard for the child's wellbeing, despite all the special attention, gifts and other behaviours the child might enjoy. The goal of the adult is to eventually be able to abuse the child for their own gratification.

A child in this situation is at very high risk of developing emotional, behavioural and psychological problems. The child is also at great risk of sexual injuries, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

The Stages of Grooming

1. Targeting the Victim

- a. The groomer identifies a child, often one who is emotionally needy, isolated, or seeking attention or validation.

2. Gaining Trust

- a. The groomer builds a bond with the child, their family, and community to appear trustworthy.
- b. They may present themselves as a mentor, authority figure, or friend to the child.
- c. In online grooming, they may pretend to be someone closer in age to the victim.

3. Filling a Need

- a. The groomer offers emotional support, gifts, special attention, or privileges to make the child feel valued and dependent on them.

- b. The groomer may provide things the child lacks, such as affection, validation, or material items.
4. **Isolation**
 - a. The groomer works to distance the child from friends and family.
 - b. They create opportunities to be alone with the child (e.g., private chats, secret meetings, sleepovers).
 - c. The child may be encouraged to keep secrets from others.
 5. **Sexualizing the Relationship**
 - a. The groomer gradually introduces inappropriate topics, touching, or exposure to sexual content.
 - b. They may test boundaries with "accidental" touching or normalized discussions of sexual topics.
 - c. Desensitization techniques, like framing abuse as love or a special relationship, are used to manipulate the child.
 6. **Maintaining Control**
 - a. The groomer uses threats, guilt, shame, or blackmail to keep the child silent.
 - b. They may convince the child that no one will believe them or that they are to blame.
 - c. Fear, loyalty, or emotional manipulation keeps the abuse hidden.
 - d. As the child would have bonded to the groomer, they will then weaponize that affection and tell the child things like "you wouldn't want them to take me away from you"

Signs of a Potential Groomer

1. **Overly Interested in a Child** – Spending excessive time with a particular child, giving special attention.
2. **Breaking Boundaries** – Insisting on physical affection (hugs, touching), even when the child resists.
3. **Frequent Alone Time with the Child** – Finding ways to isolate them from family or friends.
4. **Giving Gifts or Money Without Reason** – Offering expensive gifts or money without parental consent.
5. **Engaging in Inappropriate Conversations or Behaviours**– Discussing sexual topics, asking about relationships, or introducing explicit content. Groomers may also offer the child drugs or alcohol. This is a deliberate move to test the child's response. It is also intended to involve the child in behaviours they will not tell a trusted adult about. There is not a secret that will be slowly grown to include other behaviours over time. A common method is to get the child to take explicit pictures of themselves. Now the child will be less willing to tell a trusted adult about what is going on in case the child gets in trouble.
6. **Encouraging Secrecy** – Telling the child to keep things secret from parents or others.
7. **Befriending the Family** – Gaining trust of parents to lower suspicion and get access to the child.
8. **Testing Boundaries Gradually** – Starting with small favours or harmless touches and escalating over time.
9. **Excessive Social Media Interaction** – Messaging, video chatting, or commenting excessively on a child's posts.
10. **Downplaying Concerns** – If confronted, they may minimize their behaviour or blame the child.

What to do if you or a friend may be groomed?

1. Keep all photos, videos, chats, gifts and messages as evidence. Take screenshots if possible.
2. Tell a trusted adult such as an older sibling, relative, community social worker or teacher at school.
3. A trusted adult must open a case with the police.
4. The charge is **Sexual Exploitation of Children (Section 17 of the Sexual Offences Act) and / or Sexual Grooming of Children (Section 18 of the Sexual Offences Act)**.
5. All adults must report suspected cases of the sexual abuse of children to the police, as required by the **Sexual Offences Act**.
6. **All reports made in good faith are protected from civil or criminal actions.**

Section 54 (1)

(a): A person who has knowledge that a sexual offence has been committed against a child must report such knowledge immediately to a police official.

(b) A person who fails to report such knowledge as contemplated in paragraph (a), is guilty of an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years or to both a fine and such imprisonment.

Section 54 (2)

(c) A person who in good faith reports such reasonable belief or suspicion **shall not be liable to any civil or criminal proceedings** by reason of making such report.

IMPORTANT TO KNOW

- Remember that the child is not to blame for grooming behaviour. The adult is.
- **Even when the child has bonded to that adult and “misses” them when they are not there- this is a response that has been created by the adults. The child is not to blame for what they are feeling and how they process.**
- Grooming is a deliberate predatory practice aimed at exploiting children.
- No child will get into trouble with the law if they report being groomed to the police or other authority figure.
- A child that is being exploited by an adult will not be charged if the child took explicit pictures or videos of themselves. The child is the victim in this case.
- Do not let a groomer make you afraid to tell the truth.

Visit NICRO’s website for more crime and violence prevention resources:
www.nicro.org.za.