

What is "Grooming"?

Grooming is the process that perpetrators engage in to gradually initiate and maintain sexual relationships with child victims. A perpetrator grooms a child by developing a close relationship with them, gaining their trust, and then slowly breaking down their boundaries.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT ONLINE GROOMING?

Grooming is very similar whether it occurs online or face-to-face.

However, online grooming allows the perpetrator greater access to the child and may make it easier to deceive the child. Often perpetrators will pretend to be younger than they are in online spaces, such as social media platforms, public chat apps, or the chat section of online games.

Online grooming can include:

- Sending explicit messages
- Sharing or requesting sexual photos or videos
- Targeted manipulation
- Isolation from family and friends
- Sextortion

WHAT DOES ONLINE GROOMING LOOK LIKE?

Stage 1: Friendship Forming

The perpetrator's first interaction with the child will be friendly and seem harmless. They will attempt to lower the child's guard and make them feel special. Children who feel unloved, unpopular, misunderstood, or lack self-esteem are more likely to be targeted. The perpetrator will try to earn the child's trust through compliments, shared interests, and liking or commenting on their posts. Perpetrators will exploit a child's needs or desires to connect with them.

Stage 2: Relationship Building

Once a friendship has been formed the perpetrator will focus on developing the relationship. They will shower child victims with compliments, gifts, and/or attention. They may send children electronic devices to allow them to communicate in a more isolated way.

Stage 3: Risk Assessment

Once the perpetrator feels that the child trusts them, they will assess how involved and aware their caregivers are about the child's online life. Perpetrators seek out children that are more fragile or who can use technology with less oversight. Children who have family problems, spend time alone and unsupervised, and are isolated are more likely to protect or hide their relationship with their "new friend", particularly at the perpetrator's encouragement.

WHAT DOES ONLINE GROOMING LOOK LIKE (CONTINUED)?

Stage 4: Isolation

At this point the perpetrator will attempt to isolate the child by making them believe that they are the most important person in the child's life and that they have a special bond. The perpetrator will also try to distance the child from their family and friends.

Stage 5: Sexualization

After the perpetrator has isolated and gained the trust of a child, they will likely attempt to exploit them. They may bring up sexual topics and mislead the child if they are not educated about appropriate sexual behavior. They may show the child pornography to lower their inhibitions and normalize sex. The perpetrator may send the child sexually explicit images and ask the child to send images of themselves. They may even attempt to meet the child in person.

Stage 6: Controlling

After the sexual abuse begins, perpetrators will likely go to whatever lengths necessary to maintain control of the child to continue the abuse. Once the perpetrator has explicit images of the child, they will use it as blackmail to ensure secrecy or to coerce the child into other exploitative activities such as sending more child sexual abuse materials or meeting in person. They will convince the child that they are to blame and will get in trouble with their family, school, and/or law enforcement if they tell anyone.

HOW CAN CAREGIVERS RECOGNIZE SIGNS OF GROOMING?



Red Flags for Online Grooming

A child may be experiencing online grooming if they are...

- Spending more time online or with devices
- Being secretive about their online activity
- Hiding screens or apps when you or another adult approach
- Using new items or electronic devices from unknown sources
- Using sexual language that is not age appropriate

If you notice any of these red flags, do not jump to any conclusions.

There may be another explanation for why a child is acting differently. Use the opportunity to talk to the child about what is happening in their life and about their online activity.

To get the conversation started, approach the child while they are on their phone or other device and ask questions like:

- What app is this? How does this app work?
- What game are you playing? How do you play this game?
- Does anyone you do not know ever contact you on this? If they did, what would you do?
- If someone asked you any uncomfortable or personal questions, what would you do?



WHAT CAN CAREGIVERS DO?

- 1 Make sure your child is educated about online safety.**
Teach your child not to talk to unknown people online. Talk to them about red flags, like when someone online asks them to share personal information. Help your child recognize the signs of grooming and remind them never to share sexually explicit pictures online or with strangers.
- 2 If your child does experience online grooming, provide unconditional support.**
Children who have been groomed online may have a difficult time healing from the abuse. Their reaction may vary depending on their relationship with the perpetrator and how they were victimized. Avoid blaming or punishing your child. Let them know that it is not their fault.
- 3 Seek mental health services for yourself and your child.**
Online grooming is a form of sexual abuse and can have serious emotional effects on a child. Children may experience trauma symptoms such as, but not limited to, anxiety, depression, and sleeping difficulties. Your child needs support, from you and a mental health provider, so they can heal from the abuse. It is important that caregivers also seek support for themselves. Talking to a mental health professional will help you better meet the needs of your child.
- 4 Preserve the device and do not delete anything.**
Take the device and ensure it remains charged and on airplane mode. Keep any texts, images, and/or videos that were exchanged on the device. If you see something concerning on an app or online platform, such as a threat or request for an image from your child, make note of the perpetrator's username or account identifier. Determine how long the perpetrator was in contact with your child and if the perpetrator is friends with any of your child's friends on the app or platform. This will assist law enforcement if there is an investigation.
- 5 Report the perpetrator and block them.**
Make a report on each platform or app that the person used to communicate with your child. Have your child block, unfriend, and unfollow the perpetrator.
- 6 Update privacy settings.**
Check the privacy settings in the platforms or apps that the perpetrator used to contact your child. Update the settings so that your child cannot be contacted by unknown people. If the app or platform is designed for strangers to chat with each other, talk to your child about why it may not be appropriate for them to continue to use that app.
- 7 If your child shared sexually explicit material with the perpetrator, make a report.**
Make a report on any platform or app where images of your child were exchanged. A report should be made to local law enforcement. For more information on filing a report, see the handout ***A Guide to Reporting***. Consider also making a report to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. They will help ensure that images of your child are removed. For more information on getting a sexually explicit image removed from the internet, visit: <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/isyoudidexplicitcontentoutthere>