



# **Safeguarding Children and Youth from Sexual Abuse: Understanding Grooming Practices**

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Research Brief

January 2014

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## Introduction

Current child sexual assault programs tend to favor strategies that empower and inform the child about stopping inappropriate interactions. The problem in this method is that many offenders will look and act like caring adults while using a technique called “grooming” to cultivate relationships with children. Therefore, primary prevention efforts need to provide parents, teachers, coaches, caregivers, and others who work with young people more information about the grooming tactics used by offenders.

The present research brief reviews literature between 2003 – 2013 targeting the role of grooming in child sexual assault (note: child abuse prevention efforts were critically reviewed in a previous research brief entitled, “Safeguarding Children and Youth from Sexual Abuse: The Role of Organizations”). This brief provides key points that can inform primary prevention efforts regarding the behaviors of offenders and their grooming practices. For the purpose of this review, young people (referred to interchangeably as children and youth) are considered to be children and youth between the ages of 6 - 17 years old.

Grooming is defined as “a process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults, and the environment for the abuse of [children] . . . Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. The process of grooming serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, and may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions” (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006, p.297). Grooming techniques are usually utilized over a long period of time and in a very discreet manner. Grooming actions can appear to be behaviors that any normal and caring adult would display to a child. In this way the offender prepares the family, and the larger environment, for the deception that s/he would never engage in such a behavior (Wooden, W. & Wooden, M., 2012).

### Key Finding:

*Specific grooming goals can include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure.*

## Person-Person Grooming Behaviors

### Targets

One of the most consistent research findings is that victims of child abuse often know their abuser (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006). Offenders (for additional information on offenders, please see Appendix) tend to target children and youth who are perceived to be “vulnerable,” as characterized by low self-confidence and low self-esteem. Also, victims who lack adult supervision, are socially isolated, or emotionally needy can be perceived as being more vulnerable by perpetrators (Knoll, 2010). Boys and girls alike can be victims of sexual abuse and in the process fall prey to wide range of grooming tactics, discussed in more detail below (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008; Wooden, W. & Wooden, M., 2012).

### Strategies

Person to person grooming can be a structured and long-term activity involving a wide range of behaviors and strategies that can go undetected until after the abuse occurs (Van Dam, 2001 as cited in Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006). Three categories of grooming behaviors emerged from victims,

parents, and perpetrators reports: (1) grooming of the child or young person; (2) grooming of the environment and significant others; and (3) institutional grooming (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008; Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006).

**Grooming the child or young person.** Perpetrators first befriends or gain the trust of the potential victim and then proceed to gradually sexualize the relationship with the victim by using both physical and psychological grooming techniques (Adams, 2013). The physical techniques (Berliner & Conte, 1990 as cited in Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; Wooden, W. & Wooden, M., 2012) and psychological grooming tactics (Center for Behavioral Intervention, 2010; Knoll, 2010; Wooden, W. & Wooden, M., 2012) can be found below.

### Physical Grooming Techniques

- Playing body contact games
- Tickling
- Backrubs
- Wrestling
- The offender entering the room when the victim is undressing
- Physical contact that progresses from on top of clothing to contact without clothing

### Psychological Grooming Techniques

- Paying them special attention
- Getting to know their likes and dislikes
- Buying them gifts
- Isolating them by taking them on special outings where they can be alone
- Taking advantage of their natural curiosity about sexuality
- Desensitizing by talking or telling sexualized jokes to test boundaries
- Showing them pictures or pornographic images to normalize the behavior
- Encouraging apparently harmless secrets in preparation for later sexual secrets

In an effort to maintain the victim's silence about the abuse, offenders may manipulate the victim into believing untrue things. Specific examples can be found in the box on the right (Center for Behavioral Intervention, 2010; NSVRC, 2012). In some cases, grooming tactics are particularly effective because the young people may not actually understand that what they are experiencing is not normal due to either: (a) their young age, limiting their ability to comprehend what is happening to them; or (b) its presence in their larger family systems, environments, and communities (NSVRC, 2012).

**Familial grooming.** Grooming tactics are not only directed at the potential child or youth victim, they are also directed toward those people closest to the potential victim: the parent(s) or

### Lies Told by Offenders to Manipulate Victims

- No one will believe them if they do tell
- The victim or someone they care about will get hurt if they tell
- They will get into trouble
- It is their fault
- The relationship will end (especially complicated if the offender is a parent or primary caregiver)
- They will be stigmatized by other people
- They like it (i.e. the abuse) due to physical arousal the victim can feel

guardian(s) (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006). Families' vulnerability increases when they are characterized as having family problems, are isolated, lack confidence, and demonstrate a level of indiscriminating trust in others (Adams, 2013). Sexual offenders capitalize on this vulnerability and work to intentionally gain the family's confidence and trust with the intention of enlisting their cooperation in gaining access to the young person while reducing suspicion because the behaviors appear normal (Adams, 2013).

**Institutional grooming.** Offenders often integrate themselves into environments that increase the likelihood of having access to young people such as childcare settings, schools, and sporting activities. Sexual offenders can be so integrated into the environment, that should the victim disclose the abuse, the community will often defend the perpetrator. Furthermore, the culture of an organization can facilitate the abuse by condoning power differences, self-protection, secrecy, and by being closed off (Adams, 2013). It is important that organizations create a culture where young people are valued and thereby offenders can't use institutional grooming to their advantage.

#### Key Finding:

*It is important that organizations create a culture where young people are valued and thereby offenders can't use institutional grooming to their advantage.*

The sexual abuse grooming tactics described above are the strategies that are used when the perpetrator has direct, physical access to the child or young person. However, these person-person strategies can be modified to an online environment, as described below.

### Online/Virtual Grooming Behaviors

Internet use is very common for adolescents, as up to 93% of 12 – 17 year-olds report some usage (Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Zheng, & Drew, 2011). As the popularity of the internet has increased, the incidence of online child sexual abuse has increased. This is demonstrated by the increasing number of unwanted online sexual solicitations and convictions for internet-related sexual offenses (Atkinson & Newton, 2010; Choo, 2009). In 2008, almost one-third of all sexual offenses were internet-related (Atkinson & Newton, 2010). It should be noted that although youth have identified the majority of sexual solicitations as coming from other adolescents (between 43% - 48% depending on the source), there are still a number of sexual solicitations coming from young adults (20% - 30%) and older adults (Atkinson & Newton, 2010). Overall, up to 20% of youth have reported receiving a sexual solicitation online, with 3% of those receiving aggressive sexual solicitation during the past year (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000, as cited in Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Zheng, & Drew, 2011).

#### Targets

Both adolescents and preadolescents can be targets for internet-related grooming. Certain children are at higher risk of being targeted than others. For example, many children and youth targeted are found in online chat rooms. In a study of convicted sexual offenders, perpetrators admitted to seeking out children with "young sounding" screen names. For example, a child who selected the screen name Christy12 would be more likely to be selected than a more mature or even ambiguous-sounding name (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013). Young people who are most vulnerable to online solicitations tend to have high levels of conflict with their parents, low levels of parental supervision, a history of depression, unclear sexual orientation, mentioned sex online in some manner, and/or appear vulnerable, needy, or submissive (Atkinson & Newton, 2010; Whittle et al., 2013).

Importantly, many of the adults who solicited minors in online forums were truthful about their intentions. One study of sexual offenses against juveniles found the majority of offenders were truthful about their age and their interest in forming a sexual relationship; many of the victims reported having a close affectionate bond with the offender and were described as being “in love” (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004; as cited in Atkinson & Newton, 2010).

## Strategies

Online grooming involves a socialization process in which an adult/older child forms a relationship with a young person with sexual intentions (Davidson, 2009). Often, grooming behaviors begin with the offender forming a friendship with a child that they have met in chat-rooms or other virtual meeting places. Of children age 9 - 19 who go online once per week, one-third say they have made an online acquaintance, and 8% say they have met in-person with someone they had previously met online (Atkinson & Newton, 2010). Convicted sexual offenders have reported that building rapport and intimacy with children and youth is one of the first tools of grooming (Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2013).

Offenders often describe themselves as “mentors” and try to make the victims feel as though they are a trustworthy source; ultimately, many offenders want to be viewed positively by the child and purposefully try to make the child feel special, building an exclusive and isolating relationship between the two (Whittle et al., 2013). For example, one child who was interviewed after being a victim of online grooming said, “he asked me to tell my sister to leave the room since he cares only for me,” exemplifying how the perpetrator tried to make the child feel special and unique, while simultaneously isolating her from others (Katz, 2013, p. 1538).

Offenders also take advantage of information they find online to manipulate children. For example, children’s interests are often published on social media or online gaming sites, and are used by perpetrators to select targets with like interests, or to exaggerate similarities, thus forming the basis of a friendship (Choo, 2009; Whittle et al., 2013). Another tactic employed by offenders is the use of virtual child pornography as a tool to groom children (Cohen-Almagor, 2013). The internet allows for the easy accessibility of sexual images (Cohen-Almagor, 2013). By exposing targets to real or created pornographic images, the offender is seeking to reduce child inhibitions and to normalize sexual activities. Following these activities, the offender may encourage and teach children to masturbate, perform oral sex, and perhaps pressure the child to engage in sexual intercourse (Cohen-Almagor, 2013).

## Key Strategies

Based on current knowledge regarding grooming tactics, there are a number of key points that could inform primary prevention programs.

### Empowering Children and Youth

Regardless of the medium through which young people are exposed to grooming tactics (i.e., person-person or online/virtual), helping vulnerable young people develop a healthy and empowered view of themselves can assist in primary prevention efforts (*Stop It Now!*, 2010). Education

### Key Finding:

*Education can empower children and youth; even though it should not be the young person’s responsibility to be aware of when they are being targeted by offenders.*

can empower children and youth; even though it should not be the young person's responsibility to be aware of when they are being targeted by offenders, educating them about appropriate boundaries can safeguard against a young person falling prey to grooming tactics. Empowered children can say no to, and report, inappropriate behavior. Young people also need to keep telling adults until someone helps them.

### Understanding Appropriate Sexual Boundaries

Everyone, including young people, parents, nonparental caregivers, coaches, etc. can help to prevent future sexual assaults by knowing appropriate sexual boundaries. Everyone should know how to report inappropriate interactions when they observe them. Since the point of offenders using grooming tactics is to break down boundaries between themselves and the potential victim, not allowing this breakdown can help to protect vulnerable children and youth.

### Parental/Caregiver Tips

Parents and non-parental caregivers can be a first-line of defense against child sexual assault if they are informed about the variety in offender types, their motivations, how they access youth, and use grooming tactics. As noted in the box below, parents and other caregivers can observe a consistent pattern of behaviors in other older adolescents or adults that should cause them to be alarmed (KSARC, p. 1).

Parents and nonparental caregivers can also protect children from online grooming tactics. They should monitor the time young people spend on the internet and have conversations with the children and youth about their online activities (*Stop In Now!*, 2010). In addition, having the computer(s) and webcam(s) in a place where they can be viewed by an adult can aid in preventing a grooming relationship from ever beginning. Blocking certain types of sites and content can provide a layer of protection as well. These tips also apply in organizational settings outside the home where children are accessing the internet as well.

#### Activities that Should Cause Alarm

- Others that are exceptionally charming and/or helpful
- Attempts to obtain immediate "insider" status
- Those that consistently prefers the company of children to adults, rather than looking for age-appropriate companionship
- Attempts to establish peer relationships with people much younger than themselves
- Fails to honor clear boundaries set by parents and guardians
- Roughhousing, wrestling, or tickling of children after being asked to stop

### Staff Training

#### Key Finding:

*Organizations need to train staff to minimize the risk that an offender would have an opportunity to groom a child.*

Organizations primary prevention efforts should include training for staff to understand how to identify child abuse and neglect, which includes information needed about specific grooming tactics. This information should be incorporated into professional staff development, which should include discussions and competency building related to the following topics: (1) what constitutes inappropriate behavior between a young person and an older adolescent or adult; (2) how does staff consult and report



inappropriate interactions; and (3) how does the staff model best practices such as never being alone with a child or maintaining appropriate physical boundaries (Darwinkel, Powell, & Tidmarsh, 2013). Staff training about grooming tactics may provide the opportunity for organizations to engage in important discussions about their applicant screening process and what constitutes a “vulnerable” family situation. In other words, organizations need to train staff not just to recognize grooming tactics, but also how to minimize the risk that an offender would have an opportunity to groom a child in the first place.

### Community/Institutional Awareness

From a community perspective, research has shown that by being informed about grooming tactics, community professionals were more likely to take allegations seriously. In the case of law enforcement professionals, trainings about grooming tactics resulted in those professionals understanding what they were and increased their willingness to begin investigations after victim allegations were made (Darwinkel, Powell, & Tidmarsh, 2013).

Within the community, everyone should understand that grooming behaviors exist, what they look like, and feel empowered to say something if they witness a pattern of behavior that feels suspicious to them. It is the responsibility of the entire community to be aware of the potential for the use of grooming tactics and to know how to speak up if those behaviors are observed (*Stop It Now!*, 2010).

The community and institutions can also assist in making the online world a safer place for children. Internet providers have some obligatory reporting requirements to filter out inappropriate sites and content that are deemed as grooming tactics (Casarosa, 2011). Some prevention advocates note that the same laws that require internet providers to report suspicious content could be extended to mobile phone carriers, social-networking websites, and web-hosting companies (Casarosa, 2011). Future primary prevention efforts aimed at impacting the larger community could be adapted for online communities. This type of community should become educated regarding grooming tactics and how to report them to the authorities. Only then can the online community begin to safeguard young people and themselves from potential offenders.

### Conclusion

Grooming tactics reflect a toolkit that some offenders use to lure children and youth into overstepping appropriate sexual boundaries. These tactics are diverse, both in terms of their content and delivery. This brief covered the grooming tactics known at this time that offenders may use for both person-person relationships and also via the internet. Research has found that grooming tactics are usually used over a period of time (Adams, 2013); therefore, if caring adults and others who work with young people

#### Key Finding:

*Primary prevention efforts must be developed starting with young people themselves and building out to the communities in which they live.*

are educated about such tactics it may be possible to prevent an incident of child sexual assault from happening. Primary prevention efforts must be developed for all levels of a young person’s ecology--starting with themselves and building out to the communities in which they live. Understanding who offenders are, what their motivations might be, and the tactics they may use to engage with children can assist in developing better prevention programs and campaigns throughout the child’s life. In this way, future prevention efforts may better protect children and youth from sexual victimization.

## Appendix: Offender Background Information

To better understand and prevent child sexual abuse, researchers and practitioners have begun to focus more explicitly on sexual abuse offenders: who they are, their motivations, and how they access children. In particular, researchers have begun to focus on how perpetrators groom children leading up to the abuse.

### Offenders

Understanding the role of grooming in the sexual assault of young people has required researchers and practitioners to better understand perpetrators. Research finds that many stereotypes persist related to offender characteristics. Inaccurate information about who offends actually puts more children and youth at-risk because parents and other caregivers may be less likely to suspect anyone who does not fit the stereotypical profile of an offender. The box on the right contains some of the most pervasive myths about sexual offenders (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010).

Research finds that offenders are a diverse group. Recent evidence suggests that at least half of perpetrators are known to the victim (Gallagher, Bradford, & Pease, 2008). Although the vast majority of offenders have been identified as male (over 80% for all types) and adult (more than 66% for all acts except touching), it is important to note that up to one-third of touching offenses are committed by women (either alone or with a male accomplice), or by older children and adolescents (up to 50%; Gallagher, Bradford, & Pease, 2008).

Just as the offenders are of varying backgrounds so too are their motivations for engaging in acts of child sexual assault. Currently, the literature suggests there are two overarching types of offenders-- situational and preferential (Adams, 2013). Situational offenders can be described as those offenders who engage in child sexual assault because the opportunity presents itself. In other words, they do not seek out their victims. In contrast, preferential offenders are considered more likely to be pedophiles. A pedophile is defined as someone who has a "persistent sexual interest in prepubescent children" (Seto, 2008). The Characteristics of situational and preferential offenders can be found in the box on the next page (Adams, 2013; Lanning, 1986).

Since primary prevention efforts are meant to keep child sexual assaults from happening, integrating knowledge about the diversity of offender profiles and motivations can inform program design and curriculums. In this way, children, parents, caregivers, community members and others are better informed that offenders can look and act like everyone else.

### Myths Regarding Sexual Offenders

- Gender: Male
- Age: Older
- Socioeconomic Status: Poor
- Race: Nonwhite
- Sexual Orientation: Gay
- Mental Stability: Mentally Ill
- Relationship to Child: Stranger

### Characteristics of Situational Offenders

- Adults who use children and youth as sexual substitutes due to highly stressful conditions (in other circumstances they would engage with adults)
- Adults who do not care about what society considers to be morally right and wrong behavior in general and not particularly with regard to children and youth
- Open to a wide range of sexual partners (including children and youth) but otherwise lead normal lives
- Not socially well-adjusted in comparison to preferential offenders

### Characteristics of Preferential Offenders

- Those that tend to have an actual preference for engaging in sexual activity with children and youth
- Those that view young people as sexual objects and may have a recurrent pattern of child molestation (Lanning, 1986)
- Adults that develop intentional grooming techniques for gaining access to children and have sexual fantasies about young people (Adams, 2013; Lanning, 1986)
- More socially well-adjusted in comparison to situational offenders

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