

Handout 16 - What Is Grooming?

'Grooming' is the term used to describe behaviours employed by the sex offender to target and prepare children for sexual abuse. One of the problems for professionals and parents is that the signs that a person is grooming a child are very discreet and difficult to recognise.

The Home Office has defined grooming as: 'A course of conduct enacted by a suspected paedophile which would give a reasonable person cause for concern that any meeting with a child arising from the conduct would be for unlawful purposes.'

Grooming is a process adopted by an abuser that is normally very subtle, drawn out, calculated, controlling and premeditated. It is the subtlety of the grooming process that enables abuse to go undetected. What is vital to the paedophile is access to children and the opportunity to abuse them.

Some paedophiles will target children within a certain age range or of a certain sex or ethnicity while others will be more general in their targeting. They will all target a specific child, perhaps because they have access to them and the opportunity to abuse them without being identified as a sex offender. Some offenders target a child who is naturally approachable and others will target lonely children who are seeking attention from adults. The offender may empathise with the child's problems and liken them to the problems they had at that age and in this way make the child start to feel sorry for them. The offender will try to develop trust with the child by sharing feelings and secrets and may buy small gifts for the child, who might then be instructed to keep them secret from parents and friends.

Once the relationship is developed the offender will move on to control the child. It is this manipulation that brings conflict to the child and confuses them. The child may trust the offender or see him as a friend and at this stage the offender may test the water by introducing touching into the relationship.

Touching may start as a game, giving the offender the chance to judge the child's reaction to the touch. If the child accepts the touch the offender will move on to more sexualised touch. If the child does not accept the touching the offender may either revert to behaviour that the child has previously accepted and build up to sexualised touch again or move on to another child. This process can take a long time and the longer the offender gives to it the more the child will identify themselves as being a voluntary participant. The net result of this is that the child believes that they have allowed, and therefore invited and accepted, the sexual touching.

Once the abuse has started, children will find it very difficult to report. The offender may use emotional coercion to abuse and to secure secrecy, saying such things as, 'if you were my friend and cared for me you would touch me', or 'if you tell, your mummy will be ill'.

I once dealt with a 10-year-old girl who was being raped by her stepfather. He told her that he had planted a seed inside her and if she told anyone the seed would burst open and millions of spiders would fill her stomach.

It's not just the child who is groomed

Many paedophiles gain access to the child through their parents, developing trusting relationships that mean the parents feel their children are in safe company, even when left alone with the offender. Unfortunately, this makes it even more difficult for the child to report the abuse. In cases of professional abuse, then the colleagues around the abuser are also groomed via the persona the abuser creates in order that colleagues do not suspect abuse or if they do suspect make it difficult to believe/accept what they are seeing and /or hearing.

Grooming over the internet

In cases of online grooming, the offender uses many of the same techniques as the offender offline. The aim of the offender is still to develop a relationship that can lead to sexual behaviour. An offender can masquerade as a child of any age, sex or appearance and can pretend to have the same hobbies in order to trick a child into meeting them.

Stranger danger

The moral panic caused by high-profile cases involving the abduction and murder of children has increased parent's fear for their children's safety. However, the abduction of children is still relatively rare compared to the number of children abused by people they know. It is important for children to be taught not to go off with people that they don't know, but the biggest risk comes from family members, extended family members and friends of the family. Teaching children about strangers is acceptable to parents – in fact most parents expect schools to include stranger danger teaching in the primary school curriculum. Teaching children how to recognise problematic behaviour in adults that they know is a much harder task.

Finkelhor's (1984) work is still regarded as the definitive research of adult offenders. He refers to **4 pre-conditions** that must be met for Child Sexual Abuse to occur:

Motivation – someone has to be motivated to do it (for any of a whole range of reasons)

Internal Inhibitors – they then have to overcome the thoughts and messages (social, cultural, emotional, moral etc) which tell them that this isn't a good thing to do. They will do this in a number of ways i.e. "nothing pre teen ..."

External Inhibitors – targeting a vulnerable child, then 'chipping away' the various protective layers and networks around the child i.e. parents, siblings, friends, neighbours, school, community etc. It is often forgotten that this usually includes grooming adults (and colleagues in a professional abuse scenario). Domestic abuse may be used to hide or deflect attention away from CSA or to disempower a mother.

Overcome victim resistance – establishing trust, blurring boundaries i.e. shifting blame / responsibility, introducing 'sex', offering incentives / rewards. Threats / coercion, violence usually comes later – once the victim begins to resist explicitly