



Not this.

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## Behaviors of Sexual Predators: GROOMING

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Not this either!

**Grooming is the process during which a child sexual predator draws a child in by gaining his or her trust in order to sexually abuse the child and maintain secrecy.**

**The predator may also groom the parents by persuading them of his or her trustworthiness with children. The process of grooming may last months or even years to break through a child's defenses and increase the child's acceptance of physical contact.**

Sexual abuse can be physical sexual contact but also can be other things like someone exposing their genitals to you, showing you explicit photos or videos, or asking for or taking intimate images of you. Both grooming and abuse can happen in person, online or both.

Any person of any age, gender, sexual identity or ethnicity can groom someone for the purpose of abuse. That person may be someone you know or someone you don't know including teachers, coaches, family members or family friends, members of your church. Children and teens are not the only victims of grooming, but this guide focuses on young people.

### **Stages of grooming:**

#### **1. Targeting a victim**

Any young person is at risk of online grooming. Child sexual predators test for vulnerability and look for emotional neediness, isolation, and low self-confidence, as well as less parental attention. Some young people are more at risk, like someone living in foster care or someone with a disability. Online predators may look for teens that are lonely, or expressing sexual curiosity.

#### **2. Gaining the child's trust**

Sexual abuse is most often committed by someone that you already know, and this is because the predator usually needs to be in your circle of acquaintances to get access to you. The predator may introduce secrecy to build trust with the child and distance the child from his or her parents, such as allowing the child to do something the parents would not approve of. Predators may offer you special attention, understanding and a sympathetic ear, and then engage you in ways that eventually gain your friendship and trust (they may play games with you or give offer you rides, provide you with gifts and/or special treats).

#### **3. Filling a need**

A key part of grooming for sexual abuse is building trust with the victim. In person or online, predators try to fill a need. You may be lonely, feel unpopular, isolated or bored, and the predator will pretend to become a friend you can confide in and who can listen. They may act sympathetic, always take your side, and portray themselves as the only person who understands your problems. Their goal is to become your main emotional support. Once the predator learns to fill the child's needs with gifts, affection, or attention, they take on a more important role in the child's life. This stage is

particularly damaging because it closely mimics a positive relationship and parents may unknowingly encourage this by appreciating this unique relationship.

#### **4. Isolation and risk assessment**

When a predator thinks they have established trust, they test that bond. They may try to isolate you from family or friends, sometimes to the point of you becoming very emotionally or otherwise dependent on them. They may also start asking you to keep secrets, either about conversations or gifts they send. This is one way the predator assesses whether they can move to the next step and you will stay silent.

#### **5. Sexualization of the relationship**

Grooming begins with nonsexual touching, such as accidental or playful touching to desensitize the child so the child does not resist a more sexualized touch. The predator then exploits the child's curiosity to advance the sexuality of the interaction. The final step occurs when the predator believes they have built sufficient trust that you will do what they request and keep everything secret. They may commit sexual assault or request sexual images or videos, often increasingly explicit in nature.

### **Red Flags and Warning Signs**

**We believe it is possible for you to still have fun online, meet new friends, *and* stay safe. The key is awareness. There are red flags and warning signs that you can recognize, especially if they start to accumulate. They can help you protect yourself when sexual requests slide into your DMs.**



#### **Flattery**

It can feel nice to be noticed. Lots of likes and comments on your social media can feel good, but excessive compliments from a stranger can be a warning sign, particularly sexualized comments about your appearance.

#### **Gifts**

Online groomers/predators might send video game currency, cash, electronic devices, or other gifts to you to ingratiate themselves. This is a clear red flag. There is no reason why an adult should be sending gifts to a minor they met online, nor is it typical teen behavior to send gifts if the predator is posing as a younger person.

#### **Asking for personal information**

It is safest to avoid sharing personal and identifying information about yourself online or with those you don't know. If you are playing video games, chatting, or sharing photos for fun, there is no need for personal questions about where you live or go to school.

#### **Secret conversations**

Secrets work in the predator's favor in two different ways. To build trust, they may confide in you by telling real or made up secrets to try to make you feel special. Predators also use secrets to test that trust before escalating to sexual abuse. If someone asks you to keep a conversation secret, ask yourself why? Is the conversation inappropriate, or is it dangerous?

#### **Sending sexually explicit photos**

In the online dating world, it is almost assumed you will receive sexual photos whether you asked for them or not. Sexting is considered normal, but still has risks and consequences, particularly if you are under 18. Colorado has laws that make sexting by a minor a criminal offense.

## Requesting sexual photos

Online predators sexualize the relationship by sending and requesting explicit photos and videos, explicit letters or phone calls, or asking detailed questions about your sexual history or experience.

## Threats

After the predator receives one or multiple sexual images, they may try to blackmail you into sending more images of increasing exploitative nature. They may send threats that they will release the images online or send them to your family or school. This is a kind of extortion, or rather *sextortion*, and is another form of sexual abuse. You do not need to respond or give in, despite how terrifying the threats may seem. Seek immediate help.

## Next Steps

If you feel uncomfortable about an online conversation, reach out for help and support. Tell a parent, guardian, teacher or someone else you can trust and who won't blame you for the abuse. **It is never your fault.**



September 2022 Sources: [www.safechild.org](http://www.safechild.org) (2022); [www.scarleteen.com](http://www.scarleteen.com) (2022); [www.mcasa.org](http://www.mcasa.org)

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