

GROOMING

What is grooming?

Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of [sexual abuse](#) or [exploitation](#).

Children and young people can be groomed online or in the real world, by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional.

Groomers may be male or female. They could be any age.

Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed, or that what has happened is abuse

How grooming happens

Grooming happens both online and in person. Groomers will hide their true intentions and may spend a long time gaining a child's trust. They may also try to gain the trust of the whole family so they can be alone with the child.

Groomers do this by:

- pretending to be someone they are not, for example saying they are the same age online
- offering advice or understanding
- buying gifts
- giving the child attention
- using their professional position or reputation
- taking them on trips, outings or holidays.

Using secrets and intimidation to control children

Once they have established trust, groomers will exploit the relationship by isolating the child from friends or family and making the child feel dependent on them. They will use any means of power or control to make a child believe they have no choice but to do what they want.

Groomers may introduce 'secrets' as a way to control or frighten the child. Sometimes they will blackmail the child, or make them feel ashamed or guilty, to stop them telling anyone about the abuse.

Online grooming

Groomers can use social media sites, instant messaging apps including teen dating apps, or online gaming platforms to connect with a young person or child.

They can spend time learning about a young person's interests from their online profiles and then use this knowledge to help them build up a relationship.

It's easy for groomers to hide their identity online - they may pretend to be a child and then chat and become 'friends' with children they are targeting.

Groomers may look for:

- usernames or comments that are flirtatious or have a sexual meaning
- public comments that suggest a child has low self-esteem or is vulnerable.

Groomers don't always target a particular child. Sometimes they will send messages to hundreds of young people and wait to see who responds.

Groomers no longer need to meet children in real life to abuse them. Increasingly, groomers are sexually exploiting their victims by persuading them to take part in online sexual activity.

Child sexual abuse online

When sexual exploitation happens online, young people may be persuaded, or forced, to:

- send or post sexually explicit images of themselves
- take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone
- have sexual conversations by text or online.

Abusers may threaten to send images, video or copies of conversations to the young person's friends and family unless they take part in other sexual activity.

Images or videos may continue to be shared long after the sexual abuse has stopped.

Report online abuse to CEOP

CEOP helps keep children safe from online grooming and sexual exploitation. If someone's acted inappropriately to a child or young person you know, report it to CEOP.

How common is grooming

We don't know how common grooming is because often children don't tell anyone what is happening to them.

Children may not speak out because they are:

- ashamed
- feeling guilty

- unaware that they're being abused
- believe they are in a relationship with a 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'.

However, we know that:

- 465 contacts to ChildLine in 2014/15 mentioned grooming - over 80% of these were specifically related to online grooming ([NSPCC, 2015](#))
- 1,145 reports were made about online grooming to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) in 2012.

Over 90% of sexually abused children were abused by someone they knew

The **signs of grooming** aren't always obvious. Groomers will also go to great lengths not to be identified.

Children may:

- be very secretive, including about what they are doing online
- have older boyfriends or girlfriends
- go to unusual places to meet friends
- have new things such as clothes or mobile phones that they can't or won't explain
- have access to drugs and alcohol.

In older children, signs of grooming can easily be mistaken for 'normal' teenage behaviour, but you may notice unexplained changes in behaviour or personality, or [inappropriate sexual behaviour for their age](#).

Grooming - Keeping children safe

It's important to have conversations with children that help them understand what the risks are, how to keep safe and what to do if they ever feel scared or uncomfortable.

Talk about healthy relationships

Talk to children about healthy relationships and the difference between 'good' and 'bad' secrets. Teach younger children [the Underwear Rule](#) to help them keep themselves safe.

Tips for parents to help keep their children safe away from home

It's important that you know who your child is spending time with. You may want to get to know your children's friends but should also try to give them independence as they get older. If your [child goes to a sports club](#) or community group, ask to see their child protection policy.

Be aware of anyone who shows an unexplained interest in your child - especially if that means they would be spending time alone together, for example going on visits or babysitting.

Keeping safe online and using mobile phones

Remind children to be careful of who they accept or add as a friend online, because people aren't always who they say they are.

Our [online safety advice for parents](#) will help you understand what children do online, the risks they face and how to help your child stay safe.

Reassure them you are there to help

Let them know that you are always there to support them and they can talk to you if they ever feel worried or scared. Reassure them that you will be supportive and understanding, whatever has happened.

Resources taken from the NSPCC website