



# WHAT IS “GROOMING”?

Grooming is a tactic where someone methodically builds a trusting relationship with a child or young adult, their family, and community to manipulate, coerce, or force the child or young adult to engage in sexual activities.

## WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS THAT A PERSON MAY BE EXPERIENCING GROOMING AND/OR ABUSE?

- Extreme mood swings and changes
  - Sleep disturbances, such as nightmares
  - Inappropriate and/or excessive sexual behaviors, conversations, or knowledge
  - Avoidance or fear of specific places, people, or activities
  - Decreased interest in school, work, friends, or hobbies
  - Isolation from family and friends
  - Change in academic performance or behavior
  - Increase in unexplained health issues, such as frequent headaches or stomach aches
  - Being overly or fearfully obedient to other caretaker or people in positions of power
  - Pain or infection to the genital areas of youth, especially if this occurs frequently
  - Regressive behaviors, (e.g., thumb sucking or bedwetting in youth)
- Unexplained gifts and tokens

The person grooming identifies vulnerabilities, erodes the child's or young adult's boundaries, and builds up to acts of sexual abuse and control while convincing the world around the child or young adult that they are safe in their care. Typically, by the time abuse occurs, the individual has gained trust from the family and community and has access to alone time with the child or young adult. Due to the manipulation, children/young adults struggle to recognize and/or report the abuse. The secrecy around the relationship that the grooming has led to and the power imbalance allows for the abusive behaviors to continue. Because of its stealthy nature, grooming often goes unnoticed. Some survivors of sexual abuse explain that the grooming process was just as harmful to them as the abuse itself.

Grooming can take place in any type of relationship, often where there is a power imbalance. Grooming is discussed in the context of child sexual abuse but happens whenever one person takes advantage of another's vulnerability due to age, role, situation, or capacity to consent. These relationships include, but are not limited to, adult/child, teacher/student, employer/employee, mentor/mentee, or doctor/patient relationships. It also occurs in the context of human trafficking or teen and adult abusive intimate partner relationships.

**“IT’S NOT LIKE HE WORE A SIGN SAYING, ‘I’M A SEXUAL PREDATOR.’ HE WAS THAT COOL UNCLE.”**

*-Adam, RAINN Speakers Bureau, [rainn.org/survivor-stories](http://rainn.org/survivor-stories)*

“HE WAS SOMEONE WHO WAS ALWAYS ON MY SIDE. WHEN I WOULD GET IN TROUBLE WITH MY PARENTS, HE WOULD TELL THEM THAT I SHOULD COME OVER TO HIS HOUSE FOR THE NIGHT. MY PARENTS COULD SENSE SOMETHING WAS OFF—IT SEEMED ODD THAT I WAS SPENDING SO MUCH TIME ALONE WITH AN ADULT. THEY EVEN ASKED ME ABOUT IT, BUT I TOLD THEM THAT EVERYTHING WAS FINE. I NOW REALIZE THAT THIS WAS ALL AN EFFECT OF GROOMING.”

-Pierre, RAINN Speakers Bureau, [rainn.org/survivor-stories](http://rainn.org/survivor-stories)



## WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT GROOMING AND ABUSE?



If you suspect that child abuse has already occurred, it is your personal responsibility if you are a mandated reporter to make a report to the DCF careline at 1-800-842-2288.

You should not investigate suspicions or allegations of child physical or sexual abuse or evaluate the credibility or validity of such allegations as a condition for reporting. Become familiar with that responsibility as well as any other reporting mandates or policies that exist given your role.

There may be situations in which you may identify boundary crossing or potential grooming behaviors, but do not have reason to suspect abuse has occurred. In these situations, it's important to know how to intervene and how to create safe communities for preventing sexual abuse.

## WHAT ARE SOME RED FLAGS THAT SOMEONE IS GROOMING?

- ▶ Targeting a specific individual or “type” of individual (*particular age, gender, appearance, etc.*)
- ▶ Showing favoritism or special treatment to someone
- ▶ Building trust with families & communities to gain increased access to the child or young adult
- ▶ Building trust with the child or young adult, including positioning themselves as a particularly strong and safe presence in that person’s life, sometimes focused on a perceived vulnerability or need.
- ▶ Finding excuses to spend time alone with the child or young adult
- ▶ Isolating a child or young adult from caretakers, peers, and friends
- ▶ Requesting that the child or young adult keeps secrets from other caregivers and friends
- ▶ Beginning to erode physical boundaries through unnecessary physical contact with the child or young adult (*back pats or massaging, putting an arm around them, etc.*)
- ▶ Exposing the child or young adult to sexual and/or age-inappropriate conversations, media, and behaviors
- ▶ Giving gifts to the child or young adult without an appropriate occasion for doing so
- ▶ Frequent contact with the child or young adult via social media or text
- ▶ Expressing unusual interest in youth’s sexual development, such as comments on body during puberty
- ▶ Emotionally identifying with youth, including excessive interest or engagement in children’s media or spending an excessive amount of time around youth