



Safe Environment of the Archdiocese

Archdiocese of Oklahoma City

Office of Safe Environment

Parish/School Facilitators' Newsletter

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How Perpetrators Groom Children

Grooming is a process. It begins when the predator chooses a target area. He may visit places where children are likely to go: schools, shopping malls, playgrounds, parks, and the like. He may work or volunteer at businesses that cater to children. Other predators strike up relationships with adults who have children in the home—single parent families make particularly good targets.



Victim selection and recruitment are next. There is no prototypical victim of child sexual abuse. Any child may be victimized. Not surprisingly, predators often target children with obvious vulnerabilities. A child who feels unloved and

unpopular will soak up adult attention like a sponge. Children with family problems, who spend time alone and unsupervised, who lack confidence and self-esteem, and who are isolated from their peers are all likely targets.

Predators engage or “recruit” their victims in different ways. Many use a combination of sympathy and charm. They may offer to play games, give rides, or buy treats and gifts as tokens of friendship. They may offer drugs or alcohol to older children or teenagers. And they almost always offer a sympathetic, understanding ear. Your parents don’t understand or respect you? I do. Other kids make fun of you? I know what that’s like—it was the same way for me when I was your age. They don

Trust you at home? Boy, I know what that’s like—your parents never really want you to grow up. But I trust you. I respect you. I care for you more than anybody else. And I love you. I’m here for you.

Successful predators find and fill voids in a child’s life.

A predator will usually introduce secrecy at some point during the grooming process. Initially, secrecy binds the victim to the predator: “Here’s some candy. But don’t tell your friends because they’ll be jealous, and don’t tell your mother because she won’t like you eating between meals.” Later on, secrecy joins hands with threats: “If you tell your mother what happened, she’ll hate you. It’ll kill her. Or I’ll kill her. Or I’ll kill you.”

The forging of an emotional bond through grooming leads to physical contact. Predators use the grooming process to break down a child’s defenses and increase the child’s acceptance of touch. The first physical contact between predator and victim is often nonsexual touching designed to identify limits: an “accidental” touch, an arm around the shoulder, a brushing of hair. Nonsexual touching desensitizes the child. It breaks down inhibitions and leads to more overt sexual touching—the predator’s ultimate goal

The best way to recognize grooming behavior is to pay attention to your child and the people in your child’s life. Gavin de Becker sensibly reminds us that children require the protection of adults, usually from adults. Their fear of people is not yet developed, their intuition not yet loaded with enough information and experiences to keep them from harm.” There are many demands placed upon our time, but nothing—nothing—is more important than the welfare of our children. When we blindly surrender responsibility for



them to others without question, we invite trouble. Parents should know their child's teachers, coaches, day care providers, youth group leaders, and other significant adults in their lives. Make unannounced visits. Ask questions. Stay involved.

And please-talk to your children. Teach them to recognize grooming behavior. Teach them to be wary of any physical contact initiated by an adult. And teach them to trust you with problems and their pain. The safest child is the child who knows he can bring his problems and concerns to parents and adult caregivers without reproach or retaliation. (Excerpts of article by: Gregory M. Weber)

Stages of Grooming

Stage 1: Targeting the Victim

The offender targets a victim by sizing up the child's vulnerability-emotional neediness, isolation and lower self-confidence. Children with less parental oversight are more desirable prey.

Stage 2: Gaining the Victim's Trust

The sex offender gains trust, by watching and gathering information about the child, getting to know his needs and how to fill them. In this regard, sex offenders mix effortlessly with responsible caretakers because they generate warm and calibrated attention. Only more awkward and overly personal attention, or a gooey intrusiveness, provokes the suspicion of parents. Otherwise, a more suave sex offender is better disciplined for how to push and poke, without revealing themselves. Think of the grooming sex offender on the prowl as akin to a spy – and just as stealth.

Stage 3: Filling a Need

Once the sex offender begins to fill the child's needs, that adult may assume noticeably more importance in the child's life and may become idealized. Gifts, extra attention, affection may distinguish one adult in particular and should raise concern and greater vigilance to be accountable for that adult.

Stage 4: Isolating the Child.

The grooming sex offender uses the developing special relationship with the child to create situations in which they are alone together. This isolation

further reinforces a special connection. Babysitting, tutoring, coaching and special trips all enable this isolation.

A special relationship can be even more reinforced when an offender cultivates a sense in the child that he is loved or appreciated in a way that others, not even parents, provide. Parents may unwittingly feed into this through their own appreciation for the unique relationship.

Stage 5: Sexualizing the Relationship

At a stage of sufficient emotional dependence and trust, the offender progressively sexualizes the relationship. Desensitization occurs through talking, pictures, even creating situations (like going swimming) in which both offender and victim are naked. At this point, the adult exploits a child's natural curiosity, using feelings of stimulation to advance the sexuality of the relationship.

When teaching a child, the grooming sex offender has the opportunity to shape the child's sexual preferences and can manipulate what a child finds exciting and extend the relationship in this way. The child comes to see himself as a more sexual being and to define the relationship with the offender in more sexual and special terms.

Stage 6: Maintaining Control

Once the sex abuse is occurring, offenders commonly use secrecy and blame to maintain the child's continued participation and silence-particularly because the sexual activity may cause the child to withdraw from the relationship.

Children in these entangled relationship-and at this point they are entangled-confront threats to blame them to end the relationship and to end the emotional and material needs they associate with the relationship, whether it be the dirt bikes the child gets to ride, the coaching one receives, special outings or other gifts. The child may feel that the loss of the relationship and the consequences of exposing it will humiliate and render them even more unwanted.

(Article by: Dr. Michael Welner, Psychiatrist)



