

*The following is #3 in a series on “Grooming”. Please, if possible, share with parents via paper format or email. The more we educate and raise awareness, the more we will protect our children.*



## Here's what the predators are up to:

Child sexual predator's are not aliens! They are most often someone we know—a relative, a friend, a neighbor. Sexual predators have mastered the art of “grooming”. 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 forced teaming 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't 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.”

Article by Gregory M. Weber, Assistant Attorney General for the State of Wisconsin.

## 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 experience 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 their 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.