



Grooming for the Purposes of Exploitation and Abuse:

A Literature Review

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Grooming for the Purposes of Exploitation and Abuse: A Literature Review

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Executive Summary

Child sexual abuse is a serious issue in Canada. Grooming is universally recognized as an approach used by sexual offenders to aid them in exploiting and abusing children. Understanding and identifying grooming is essential for developing prevention measures and decreasing instances of child sexual abuse and exploitation. As online and media technology have improved and become more accessible, grooming processes have extended into the online realm. Given that grooming often involves a variety of seemingly normal behaviours and discrete acts that are not necessarily criminal or abusive on their own, it can be challenging to identify when a child is being groomed. Additionally, while grooming is often a precursor to child sexual abuse, it does not always lead specifically to abuse, and abuse can take place in the absence of grooming. The apparent “normalcy” of grooming behaviours poses a challenge to estimating its prevalence.

The purpose of this report is to examine the concept of grooming more fully, including varying definitions, prevalence, signs of grooming, risk factors for victimization, and research-based strategies for prevention and intervention. The **first section** of this literature review will outline definitions, types, and processes of grooming as well as prevalence estimates. The **second section** presents information on victims of grooming, including risk factors for victimization and consequences and outcomes of being groomed. The **third section** examines characteristics of grooming perpetrators and motivations for grooming. The final **fourth section** outlines methods for protecting potential victims of grooming.

Adequate knowledge of grooming can aid in accurate detection of grooming behaviours and may prevent sexual abuse from occurring and reduce other negative harms from grooming. There are a wide variety of strategies that can be employed for improving detection and cessation of grooming, such as training interventions; school-based policy development and application; changing institutional or organizational culture; and educating youth, parents, and educators about online safety. Parental monitoring and conversations with children can also decrease the risk of grooming.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a serious issue in Canada. Sexual victimization of children may include non-contact sexual offences (e.g., exposing a child to sexually explicit acts), contact sexual offences (e.g., touching or fondling the genital area), one-time occurrences, multiple occurrences, one offender, multiple offenders, with/without the use of violence, and the use of technology (e.g., sexting) (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2018). Child sexual abuse offenders may be known to a child (e.g., family member, family friend, teacher, coach) or unknown to the child and their family. The majority of child sexual abuse cases are not reported to professionals, including physicians, social workers, police, and educators (Burczycka & Conroy, 2017). Lack of reporting can be the result of the age of victims (younger), secrecy around the abuse (particularly if it involves families and grooming practices), and victims' experiences of shame (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2018).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 1999, p. 15) defines child sexual abuse as “the involvement of a child in a sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person”. Child sexual exploitation is one form of child abuse that involves an individual or group taking advantage and using their power to coerce, manipulate, or deceive a child into engaging in sexual activity (Beckett et al., 2017). A key distinguishing factor of child exploitation is the exchange of something the child wants or needs for their engagement in sexual activity and/or financial gain or increased status for the perpetrator resulting from the exchange (Beckett et al., 2017).

Grooming is universally recognized as an approach used by sexual offenders to aid them in exploiting and abusing children (Berliner, 2018; Whittle et al., 2013a). However, there is no single agreed upon definition of grooming among scholars. Based on a review of the literature, one group of researchers proposed what is considered the most comprehensive definition of grooming: “A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults, and the environment for the abuse of a child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions.” (Craven et al., 2006, p. 297). Grooming may take place in real world settings or online; the internet and online environment often offer greater opportunity for children to be exploited and victimized given the “disinhibition” (i.e., lack of restraint related to anonymity, different personas, and behaviour) that can occur compared to offline situations (Whittle et al., 2013a).

Understanding and identifying grooming is essential for developing prevention measures and decreasing instances of child sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as for reducing the harms experienced for victims of grooming (Spraitz et al., 2018). The purpose of this report is to examine the concept of grooming more fully, including varying definitions, prevalence, signs of grooming, risk

factors for victimization, and strategies for prevention and intervention. The **first section** of this literature review will outline definitions, types, and processes of grooming as well as prevalence estimates. The **second section** presents information on victims of grooming, including risk factors for victimization and consequences and outcomes of being groomed. The **third section** examines characteristics of grooming perpetrators and motivations for grooming. The final **fourth section** outlines research-based strategies for prevention and intervention. Peer-reviewed research literature was the primary source for this report, but other evidence-based documents from reputable organizations (e.g., World Health Organization) were also consulted. Attempts were made to consult more current literature (i.e., within the last 10 years), but in some cases older literature was examined.

2. Definitions and Prevalence Estimates of Grooming

2.1 Defining Grooming

It is widely accepted within the research literature that a common feature in the perpetration of sexual offenses is what is called a preparatory process, or grooming (Elliot, 2017; Lanning, 2010; Leclerc et al., 2009). Over the last 20 years, the concept of grooming has increasingly been examined by researchers and clinicians within the context of child sexual abuse (Burgess & Hartman, 2018), particularly since grooming significantly increases the likelihood of sexual abuse (Whittle et al., 2013a). While many individuals possess a basic understanding of grooming, there are discrepancies and variations in its definition within the literature (Kloess et al., 2019). Several researchers have cautioned that the lack of a consistent definition of this term can create difficulties in developing legislation against people who groom children for the purposes of sexual abuse (Elliot, 2017).

In addition to the WHO definition presented in the introduction, grooming has been defined as behaviour an offender adopts in preparation for sexually abusing a child (McAlinden, 2006), methods used to access and prepare children for compliance with abuse (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014), "inappropriate behaviour that functions to increase the likelihood of future sexual abuse" (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, p. 969), and "the process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child's confidence and trust, enabling [the abuser] to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity" (Gillespie, 2002, p. 411). A more comprehensive definition proposed by McAlinden (2012) recognizes grooming as "the use of a variety of manipulative and controlling techniques; with a vulnerable subject; in a range of inter-personal and social settings; in order to establish trust or normalize sexually harmful behaviour; with the overall aim of facilitating exploitation and/or prohibiting exposure" (p. 11). This definition has been commended for its acknowledgement of a perpetrator's use of grooming to both facilitate and conceal child sexual abuse (O'Leary et al., 2017). Grooming has also been deemed an umbrella term referring to a range of techniques, behaviours, and activities including targeting and entrapment (Gallagher, 2000), manipulation (Sullivan & Quayle, 2012), and recruitment (Conte et al., 1989).

2.2 Grooming Types and Processes

In addition to varying definitions, there appears to be a lack of consensus regarding the grooming process and the ways in which it differs from normal, non-coercive adult-child interactions (Burgess & Hartman, 2018). Given that grooming often involves a variety of seemingly normal behaviours and discrete acts that are not necessarily criminal or abusive on their own, it can be challenging to identify when a child is being groomed (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; O'Leary et al., 2017). While some grooming techniques are brief with unclear start and end points, others frequently continue during and even after sexual abuse has occurred (Bennet & O'Donohue, 2014; O'Leary et al., 2017). It is important to note that although grooming is often a precursor to child sexual abuse, it does not always lead specifically to abuse, and abuse can take place in the absence of grooming (Kloess et al., 2019; McAlinden, 2012).

While not all sexual assault perpetrators engage in preparatory processes, childhood sexual abuse rarely occurs spontaneously and most sex offenders report developing relationships with victims, as well as their caregivers and guardians, prior to sexual contact (Elliot, 2017). Grooming individuals within a target's environment can be useful for finding victims, reducing the chance of being reported, and decreasing the believability of a victim if a perpetrator is reported (Tanner & Brake, 2013). Groomers aim to have their association with victims seen as positive and valued (Tanner & Brake, 2013) and to be characterized as kind, charming, and helpful (van Dam, 2001). Another aim is to have the interactions between the offender and victim seem "normal" and "natural" (Bennet & O'Donohue, 2014; Williams & Hudson, 2013).

Examples of seemingly "normal" behaviours perpetrators may use in the grooming process include targeting children with age-appropriate games or toys (i.e., gift giving), taking an interest in child play and toys that exceeds the caregiving role, asking a child to keep the relationship a secret, testing personal boundaries, encouraging inappropriate physical contact, isolating a child from peers, creating emotional dependence, and nurturing or supporting a child (Bennet & O'Donohue, 2014; O'Leary et al., 2017). Assessing these types of behaviours as grooming can be challenging and subjective considering that these discrete acts are not necessarily criminal or abusive (Bennet & O'Donohue, 2014; Bennett & O'Donohue, 2020; O'Leary et al., 2017). In some cases, offenders use negative attention (e.g., name calling) to motivate the child to want to please them (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). However, there are seemingly more obvious grooming behaviours that might be employed, including flirtatious conversations, exposing children to pornography, giving children drugs and/or alcohol, threats, coercion, and intimidation (Whittle et al., 2013a; Williams et al., 2013; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

Craven et al. (2006) identified three specific types of grooming. The first is self-grooming which refers to a perpetrator's justification or denial of their offense(s) and is said to relate to the initial, preparatory stages of child abuse or exploitation (Craven et al., 2006). The second is grooming the environment and significant others, whereby perpetrators become integrated into a community and adopt roles in positions of trust and close proximity to the child (McAlinden, 2006). Perpetrators might also groom significant others of the child to increase access and abuse

opportunities (Kloess et al., 2014). The third type of grooming identified by Craven et al. (2006) is grooming the child. This involves developing an exclusive relationship, building trust, making the child feel special, providing attention and appreciation, giving the impression of there being a special bond and unique relationship, sharing interests, giving presents, and developing control and isolating the child – all with the intent of decreasing the likelihood of being reported (Kloess et al., 2014). The perpetrator may then slowly and systematically introduce sexual themes into the relationship with the child to desensitize them to sexual activities (Kloess et al., 2014).

Other models of sexual grooming include Olson et al.'s (2007) theory of luring communications which includes four separate factors: 1) gaining access, 2) the cycle of entrapment, 3) communicative responses to sexual acts, and 4) ongoing sexual abuse (Elliot, 2017). However, this model has been criticized for being too narrowly focused on only certain offenses and contexts (e.g., offenses committed by male adults against prepubescent and early pubescent victims) which limits its generalizability (Elliot, 2017). Another model by O'Connell (2003) considers cyber exploitation, where grooming takes place online via the internet (Elliot, 2017). This model contains three phases – targeting, grooming, and exploitation – with seven stages: 1) friendship forming, 2) relationship forming, 3) risk assessment, 4) exclusivity, 5) sexual, 6) fantasy re-enactment, and 7) damage limitation (Elliot, 2017). Stages 1 and 2 involve seeking information and gaining insight about a potential victim, while stages 3 and 4 relate to establishing secretiveness and exclusivity. In stages 5 to 7, sexual topics are introduced into conversations by way of 1) gentle boundary pushing, 2) exposure to pornography or sending/requesting sexual images, and 3) fantasy re-enactment through encouragement or coercion. However, this model is also limited in its generalizability in that it focuses on sexual offenders who primarily target female children within an online context (Elliot, 2017).

Similarly, Webster et al. (2012) developed an internet-based grooming model containing six key features: 1) offender vulnerability (challenging life events, breakdown of interpersonal relationships); 2) scanning (mapping online territory and appraising potential targets); 3) identity (choosing how to represent themselves online); 4) contact (mode of contact, number of individuals contacted, style of contact, and time point of contact); 5) intensity (desensitization using visual images, language, and incentives); and 6) outcome (e.g., collecting images, sexualized discussions) (Elliot, 2017). Again, this model is limited to online contexts.

In response to the identified limitations of these previous models while also integrating their strengths, Elliot (2017) developed a more universal self-regulation model of sexual grooming founded on four assumptions: 1) grooming is a goal-directed behaviour; 2) goals can be varied, multiple, and hierarchical; 3) goal progression is determined and monitored by the individual working toward the goal; and 4) the mechanics of self-regulation involve feedback loops, whereby internal or external feedback about progress toward a goal can negatively or positively change goal-directed behaviour (e.g., get positive feedback -> keep moving toward the goal, get negative feedback -> adjust goal-directed behaviour appropriately or stop working towards the

goal). This model is comprised of two distinct phases: 1) potentiality phase focusing on rapport-building, incentivization, disinhibition, and security-management, which all help increase the likelihood of goal attainment; and 2) disclosure phase which capitalizes on phase 1 processes and systematically introduces goal-relevant information to desensitize the target (Elliot, 2017). Winters and Jeglic (2017) outlined the following grooming steps based on their review of the literature: 1) selection of a victim based on attractiveness, ease of access, perceived vulnerabilities, etc.; 2) gaining access to a potential victim; 3) trust development with potential victim and often their loved ones/family; and 4) gradually increasing physical contact.

A recent scoping review of 93 articles from the 1970s to 2020 resulted in the identification of common grooming strategies (Ringenberg et al., 2022). A general summary of these strategies has been outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Grooming strategies identified within the research literature (Ringenberg et al., 2022)

Strategy	Description
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access gained through child-centric hobbies, lonely mothers, occupations, and designated public areas for children (e.g., playgrounds). • Online groomers find victims by searching for victim profiles that meet their needs, contacting as many victims as possible, filtering based on desired location, and assessing victim vulnerabilities. • Groomers without enough access to potential victims may change their role to work more closely with children.
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use roles such as religious leader, parent, or caretaker to gain compliance of children and to manipulate the adults around children. • Authority used by groomers to make threats, gain physical access, and grant privileges to compliant victims. • Groomers may rely on organizational structures to keep abuse hidden from the larger community.
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust gained by establishing mutual interests and experiences with victims through aligned interests and self-disclosures. • In offline settings, trust is a means for normalizing the abuse and gaining cooperation.
Enticements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-violent and persuasive methods used to progress the relationship with the victim and gain sexual control and discretion. • Can include gifts, affection, special attention, flattery, sexualized horseplay, games, bribes, privileges, privilege denial, sharing of pornography, favours exchanged for sexual episodes, special activities or outings, acting as a mentor, and expressions of exclusivity. • In some cases, gifts are transactional (e.g., gifts for sexual activity).
Deception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groomers may lie about interests and real-world identity (e.g., age, gender, appearance). • False videos, fake profiles, and stolen images may be used to deceive victims.

Sexualization of Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groomers sometimes use a direct communication style and make their sexual intents known quickly, particularly in online settings. • Other groomers introduce gradual sexualization, excuses, and justifications to push boundaries until the victim expresses discomfort. • Following victim discomfort, groomer slows down, stops temporarily, or attempts to disinhibit the victim. • Sexualization may begin with innocuous questions leading into questions about the victim’s sexual history, sexual compliments, requests for sexual images, mild sexual suggestions, and descriptions of the groomer’s past sexual experiences. • Online text and webcam sessions framed as an innocuous exchange, often leading to groomer exposing themselves or masturbating (more likely to occur in cases of female victims than males). • Offline groomers also use digital media (e.g., share sexual images, videos, adult pornography, and child pornography). • Teaching about sexual acts using pornography is another component of progressive sexualization in both offline and online groomers.
Coercion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrapment methods used to gain compliance without physical harm. • Implicit coercion includes guilt or obligation, pressure, authority or adult sophistication, and moral manipulation. • Explicit coercion includes threats to bodily harm, threats to harm younger siblings, yelling, intimidation, and sometimes violence.
Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves physical and emotional seclusion of a victim over time. • Online groomers convince victims to physically and emotionally isolate themselves to emphasize exclusivity of the relationship. • Outside of organizational settings, groomers isolate victims by disallowing social events, restricting access to friends, taking up the victim’s free time, and other similar methods.
Secrecy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used to facilitate future sexual episodes. • Methods for ensuring secrecy include threats, guilt, fear, bribes, granting or removing privileges, and sometimes physical harm. • Mutual secrecy, framed as intimacy, can be used to encourage the victim not to divulge abuse in both online and offline contexts. • Online groomers generally do not use coercion or manipulation to maintain secrecy because the victims themselves prefer to keep the relationship a secret.
Media Progression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online conversations may begin in chat rooms or on social media and then progress to other mediums (e.g., direct messaging, web cams, cellphones). • Talking on multiple platforms can help groomers avoid detection, engage the victim in constant conversation, and establish a closer bond with victim.
Alcohol and Substance Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commonly used by offenders to disinhibit themselves and victims or to subdue victims. • When substances are used, groomers are more likely to use coercive methods with victims. • Used in both offline and online contexts.

There are also various communication strategies perpetrators employ to foster relationship-building and trust with victims, many of which are used in the development of relationships more generally without intentions of abuse (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2018). For example, Cialdini (2009) presented six principles of persuasion that may be adopted as part of the grooming process to gain the trust and compliance of children (Table 2). Deception is one of the most common strategies adopted by offenders, which can include lying about themselves (e.g., age) and using fake photos (Bergen et al., 2014). Bribery in the form of gifts or money is another common strategy used by offenders to gain sexual access to children and youth (De Santisteban & Gamez-Guadix, 2017).

Table 2. Principles of social persuasion adopted for the grooming process (Cialdini, 2009)

Principle	Description
Reciprocity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling of obligation to give back after receiving <p>Child sex offenders often make use of attention, favours, and affection to increase probability that children will comply with requests.</p>
Commitment and consistency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being consistent across all commitments <p>Initial requests from offenders may seem minor (e.g., requests for details about an individual's life) compared to later sexually based requests (e.g., sending a sexually explicit photo of oneself).</p>
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tendency to rely on and trust authority figures to guide decisions <p>Offenders may use direct or indirect cues to signal status and expertise to children and may even offer to mentor them on many topics, including sexuality.</p>
Social proof	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliance on the action of others to guide one's own behaviour <p>Offenders often convince children that others/peers are engaging in the behaviour they are being requested to perform.</p>
Scarcity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value added to items perceived to be less available, rare, or uncommon <p>Offenders convey this by describing their relationship with youth as a secret, exclusive, and/or unique.</p>
Liking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tendency to favour individuals they know or like or who are perceived to be more like themselves <p>Offenders will attempt to learn about an individual's life and convey liking, similarity, and shared interests, all part of the friendship-forming process.</p>

Overall, the grooming process is considered transient and fluid (Gillespie, 2002; Mooney & Ost, 2013), to generally occur only after an individual has been targeted and contacted by a

perpetrator, and to cease once a perpetrators' goal(s) has been achieved (Elliot, 2017)¹. Further, the grooming process can vary depending on the individuals involved (Whittle et al., 2015). Some researchers suggest that grooming behaviours are unlikely to be detected in cases of abuse perpetrated by family members and professionals (i.e., teachers, coaches) (Gillespie, 2002; Ost, 2004) and, when possible, is more easily recognized retrospectively because of the seemingly innocent nature of grooming behaviours which appear similar to typical adult-child interactions (Craven et al., 2006). Groomers may also pivot and adopt new strategies if they suspect being caught (Conte et al., 1989). Although more research on sexual grooming behaviours may be beneficial for better identifying when it is occurring (Winters & Jeglic, 2017), Table 3 outlines some potential warning signs of sexual misconduct occurring between a child and person of authority or trust.

Table 3. Potential Warning Signs of Sexual Misconduct (Shakeshaft, 2004; Sutton, 2004)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obvious or inappropriate preferential treatment of child • Excessive time spent alone with child • Excessive time spent with child outside of group activities • Repeated time spent in private spaces with child • Driving child to or from activities/events • Befriending parents and making visits to their home • Acting as child's confidante • Giving small gifts, cards, or letters to child • Inappropriate calls or emails to child • Overly affectionate behaviour with child • Flirtatious behaviour or off-colour remarks around child • Other children suspect, make jokes or references

2.3 Online Grooming

Given that online child sexual abuse is a relatively new phenomenon, the academic research on the topic is still relatively sparse and underdeveloped (Chiang & Grant, 2017). Forms of online sexual victimization include dissemination of pictures or "sexts" (Martin, 2015), sexual solicitation (Mitchell et al., 2001), sextortion (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016), and online grooming (Whittle et al., 2013a). Online grooming (or e-grooming), specifically, makes use of information and communication technologies to gain access to and confidence of potential victims as a means for soliciting or maintaining sexual interactions (online, offline, or both) (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2018). Some researchers include the obtainment of sexual material from minors as another common facet of online grooming (Kloess et al., 2014).

Concerns related to online sexual grooming have increased socially and academically (Bentley et al., 2019; Gamez-Guadix et al., 2018), particularly because the internet and social network services make it easier to access, initiate contact with, and groom victims (Black et al., 2015; Quayle et al., 2014; Shannon, 2008; Whittle et al., 2013b). For example, social media and

¹ Grooming can sometimes continue even after sexual abuse has occurred (Bennet & O'Donohue, 2014; O'Leary et al., 2017).

communication mediums not monitored by parents, such as adolescent chat rooms, make it easier to select, connect with, and build rapport with youth (Black et al., 2015; Quayle et al., 2014). Online grooming is like general grooming (Wolak et al., 2009), but differs in that grooming is often easier online given the anonymity and accessibility the internet offers (Briggs et al., 2011). Use of the internet can also shorten the trust-and-relationship-building period between the offender and victim (Katz et al., 2018). One study found that some offenders may spend less than a week engaging with a child online before attempting to meet in-person (Briggs et al., 2011).

The stereotype of online predators using trickery and violence to prey on children is largely inaccurate (Wolak et al., 2010). Instead, online grooming more often models statutory rape (i.e., adult offenders who meet, develop relationships with, and seduce underage youth) (Wolak et al., 2010). The online grooming process may involve interactions related to sexual content, playing online sex games, sexual talk, and eventually sexual activities (online and face-to-face) such as performing sexual acts via webcam (De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Kloess et al., 2014; Patrick et al., 2016; Whittle et al., 2013a). Interactions seem to take place primarily in chatroom and instant messaging environments (Wolak et al., 2006). The anonymity of chatrooms seems to enable, and even encourage, the use of distinct techniques (Black et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013). When online, offenders can modify their identities to suit their victims and can initiate the grooming process with multiple victims simultaneously (Berson, 2003). While groomers may try to gauge victims' willingness to engage in sexual contact, maintain secrecy, and meet in-person (Webster et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2014), not all online groomers intend to meet victims offline (Briggs et al., 2011; Gottschalk, 2011; Whittle et al., 2014). As such, researchers have distinguished between "contact-driven" offenders who intend to connect with victims offline, and "fantasy-driven" offenders who mainly communicate online (Briggs et al., 2011). Distinctions are also made by researchers between what are labelled as more indirect versus direct approaches. Indirect approaches include persistence, begging, desperation for sexual stimulation, gentle pressuring, expressing sadness, and reminding victims of promises they made, while direct approaches involve the use of more forceful strategies such as blackmail, threats, insults, and peer pressure (Kloess et al., 2019). Showing pornographic material to victims serves to normalize offender behaviour while desensitizing victims, lowering their inhibitions, overcoming resistance, and achieving compliance (Marcum, 2007).

Some researchers have also proposed stages of online grooming. For example, O'Connell (2003) identified the a) friendship forming stage, b) relationship-forming stage, c) risk assessment stage (i.e., chances of getting caught), d) exclusivity stage (e.g., emphasizing the relationship as special), e) sexual stage (e.g., engaging in sexual behaviour), and f) concluding stage (i.e., ending contact). Overall, online grooming appears to be a varied and nonlinear process as most offenders vary in terms of the types of stages, order of stages, and time spent in each stage (Kloess et al., 2019; Whittle et al., 2014).

2.4 Prevalence Estimates of Grooming

Prevalence estimates of grooming (online and offline) are difficult to determine given that not all grooming leads to an offense (i.e., sexual abuse), grooming behaviours often mimic regular adult-child interactions, and this topic is under researched (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Bryce, 2010; Kloess et al., 2014; Whittle et al., 2013a). Despite this, there are some lines of evidence that provide some understanding of the prevalence of this phenomenon. According to Winters and Jeglic (2017), about half of all child sex offenders use some form of grooming strategy prior to abusing victims. One study reported that among adolescents aged 10-17 years, anywhere from 5-9% had experienced grooming (Bergen et al., 2014). Another study from Spain reported that 12% of adolescents between 12 and 15 years of age had been victims of grooming by adults (de Santisteban & Gamez-Guadix, 2017; 2018). Other studies have reported that between 18.5% and 24.4% of adolescents have been contacted by a groomer online, and 4.5% received explicit sexual requests (Schulz Bergen et al., 2016; Wachs et al., 2016).

Online perpetrators often attempt to continue the abuse offline (Beech et al., 2008; Wells & Mitchell, 2008). Wolak et al. (2004) reported that in 74% of online cases, children met perpetrators offline. One systematic review of literature relating to sexual exploitation of young people online found that between 13% and 19% of youth aged 10-17 years in the United States have experienced online sexual solicitation (Ospina et al., 2010). Of the 2,391 reports received by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) between 2009 and 2010, 64% were in relation to grooming² (CEOP, 2010). The United Kingdom charity Childline also reported that 60% of sampled youth had been asked for a sexual photograph or video; 33% reported that they sent a sexual photo or video to someone they met online but did not know in real life, and 15% reported that they sent it to a total stranger³ (Internet Watch Foundation, 2013). Another line of research found that 32% of a sample of Swedish children between the ages of 9 and 16 years reported having received online sexual solicitations (Shannon, 2008). With an estimated 66% of adolescents reporting regularly using online chatrooms (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008) and an increasing number of CEOP reports specifically involving social networking sites and the use of webcams to exploit children (CEOP, 2010), there is a need to educate both children and caregivers about internet safety (Kloess et al., 2014).

3. Victims of Grooming

3.1 Risk Factors for Victimization

There are a variety of personality, behavioural, and social markers that can assist in assessing an individual's level of risk of becoming a victim of grooming. Risk factors may co-occur, and individuals can experience multiple and recurring risks (Masten & Powell, 2003; Sameroff et al., 2003). Child sex offenders have reported that vulnerability is the most important factor in selecting a victim (Sullivan, 2009). Indeed, Plummer (2018) identified three factors that can

² Other reports included causing/inciting youth to watch sexually explicit material, performing sexual acts via webcam, and inciting a child to perform a sexual act.

³ This report did not identify whether the online contact and/or strangers were adults or other youth.

facilitate successful grooming: 1) vulnerabilities of participants and exploitation of those factors; 2) social position of trust and authority held by the abuser, which can minimize suspicion from outsiders; and 3) a social context with limited support for the victim. Vulnerabilities can include the need for affection or attention, early traumatization (e.g., physical or sexual abuse), marginalization, confusion about sexual orientation, ethnic minority status, disability (e.g., physical, mental, or learning), and exclusion from peer groups (Brunnberg et al., 2012; Sinanan, 2011; Sullivan, 2009; Whittle et al., 2015; Wolak et al., 2010; Yancey & Hansen, 2010). Social isolation can also increase children's risk of being targeted (Webster et al., 2010; Olson et al., 2007).

Children from single parent families (Lauritsen, 2003), with poor relationships with their parents (Jack et al., 2006), with dysfunctional family dynamics (Olson et al., 2007), with parents who abuse substances (Berger et al., 2010; Suseg et al., 2008), and with lack of family cohesion (Stith et al., 2009) are considered more vulnerable and at risk for being targeted by groomers. Being from a low socioeconomic group can also make children more susceptible to abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010). However, additional research has also looked at the role of socioeconomic privilege and access to the internet. This research suggests that this can lead to children spending more time online and increasing their exposure to risk (Livingstone et al., 2011; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012).

Whether offline or online, girls are more likely to be targeted and victimized compared to boys (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Helweg-Larsen et al., 2011; Pereda et al., 2009; Winters et al., 2017; Wolak et al., 2008). Girls are also more likely than boys to receive requests for sexts (i.e., sexually explicit photos) (Mitchell et al., 2007). It should be noted, however, that a significant number of victims are indeed male (Wolak et al., 2008), and the sexual abuse of boys tends to be underreported due to stigma (O'Leary & Barber, 2008). In particular, boys who are gay or question their sexual orientation may be targeted (Suseg et al., 2008; Winters et al., 2017). Findings on the level of risk based on age are mixed, with some research suggesting that pre-pubertal individuals are most at risk (Children's Bureau and Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; Murthi & Espelage, 2005), and others reporting that adolescents are more likely to be targeted (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Bebbington et al., 2011; Quayle et al., 2012; Winters et al., 2017).

Additional factors related to grooming risk can include sexual disinhibition that involves traits such as sensation seeking and impulsivity (Bennet & O'Donohue, 2014). Specific Big Five personality traits (i.e., extraversion and neuroticism) have also been identified as potentially putting individuals at risk for grooming (Gamez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018; Hernandez et al., 2021; Liu & Zheng, 2020). For example, extroverts are more likely to disclose information about themselves and present themselves sexually on social media (Bobkowski et al., 2016). They are also more likely to interact with others online and develop a positive online self-concept (Wang, 2019). Another personality trait related to online grooming includes narcissism, which often relates to an aim to be desired by others (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Cheng et al., 2019; Gamez-

Guadix & Mateos-Perez, 2019; Hernandez et al., 2021; Schoeps et al., 2020; Wang, 2019). Additional interpersonal features that can increase risk for grooming and abuse include low self-esteem, susceptibility to persuasion, behaviour difficulties, delinquent tendencies, emotional suffering, immaturity, and mental health issues (e.g., depression) (Livingstone et al., 2011; Olson et al., 2007; Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012; Webster et al., 2012; Winters et al., 2017; Wolak et al., 2008).

Frequent social media use is associated with an increased risk of posting sexually explicit self-portraits as well as being groomed online (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2018; Hernandez et al., 2021; Mori et al., 2020; Rial et al., 2018). Since grooming can involve sending sexts, sexting behaviour is also important to examine among youth (Gasso et al., 2019). For more information about youth sexting, please refer to the Prevention Institute's report *Youth Sexting: A Critical Review of the Research Literature* (resource #7-541, available at <https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/youth-sexting-a-critical-review-of-the-research-literature/>). For information about online resources related to sexting, please see the Prevention Institute's report *An Environmental Scan of Online Resources Related to Sexting* (resource #7-540, available at <https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/an-environmental-scan-of-online-resources-related-to-sexting/>).

3.2 Consequences and Outcomes of Grooming

Grooming can have both short- and long-term effects on victims, regardless of whether it occurs online or offline. It is important to note that children and youth may not understand that they have been groomed and may have complicated feelings like loyalty, admiration, and love for their groomer (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, NSPCC, n.d.; Whittle et al., 2013a). As grooming behaviours often appear normal and typical of consensual relationships, not all youth who are groomed perceive these behaviours as unwanted or violating. Groomers may give them attention and affection that they have not received elsewhere (Berliner, 2018). Some youth may find the interactions exciting, fun, and flattering (Berliner, 2018), at least at first. Youth may initially believe that they are voluntarily engaging with a perpetrator only to discover later that they had been lured, manipulated, and even forced into engaging in sexual activities (Joleby et al., 2021).

Victims of grooming may have difficulty sleeping and concentrating, may experience anxiety, and may become withdrawn, uncommunicative, angry, or upset (NSPCC, n.d.). Victims may also experience longer term effects like depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress, self-harm and suicidal thoughts, feelings of shame and guilt, and issues with substance use (NSPCC, n.d.; Whittle et al., 2013a). Thematic analysis of interviews conducted with 7 females aged 17 to 24 years who had experienced online grooming and subsequent sexual abuse highlights the varied experiences among victims (Joleby et al., 2021). Negative effects to health and well-being were common, with many reporting experiencing anxiety, depression, shame, self-blame, loss of identity, body dysmorphia, distrust in others, and suicidal ideation (Joleby et al., 2021). Other studies have echoed findings regarding victims' experience of shame and self-blame (Berliner,

2018). Grooming processes can also result in victims doubting their perceptions and experiences (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

Similar to grooming, the consequences of online and offline abuse can be equally severe and harmful (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2020a; Jonsson et al., 2019; Whittle et al., 2013a). Research has shown that those experiencing multiple risk factors (e.g., prior abuse or neglect, social isolation, family difficulties) had greater negative effects after grooming and abuse (e.g., higher levels of self-harm and depression) (Whittle et al., 2013a). These youth were also more likely to experience unsupportive and negative responses from their families (Whittle et al., 2013a), likely compounding the negative effects. Isolation and normalization of grooming behaviours can exacerbate subsequent trauma of any sexual abuse that occurs, which can complicate and delay the healing process (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). When grooming does result in sexual abuse, victims are also at risk for sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (NSPCC, n.d.). Whether a victim experiences particular negative outcomes or not is the result of interactions between a number of factors, including the victim's life experiences prior to the abuse, how the victim interprets the abuse, the nature of the abuse, and the reactions and support given to the victim (Whittle et al., 2013a). Whittle et al. (2013a) state that the negative effects of grooming and abuse are related to the risk and protective factors impacting the victim before the onset of grooming.

4. Perpetrators of Grooming

4.1 Characteristics of Perpetrators

Given that individuals' offenses can vary depending on their victims' characteristics and can change over time (DeHart et al., 2016), the potential to use fixed demographic profiles to identify different types of offenders is limited (Chiu et al., 2018). However, there appears to be clear distinctions between perpetrators who offend solely online and those who offend offline. Perpetrators who connect with children online can differ in their motivations. Some individuals are more contact-driven (also referred to as a contact or hands-on child sex offenders) and want to meet their victims in-person, while others are fantasy-driven (also referred to as fantasy child sex offenders or internet solicitors) with no motivation to meet victims face-to-face (Briggs et al., 2011).

Contact-driven individuals are considered a greater threat to children compared to fantasy-driven individuals, given that the former can both psychologically and physically harm the child (Chiu et al., 2018). There is some evidence that contact-driven individuals are more likely to be repeat offenders (McCarthy, 2010) and more likely to network with other sex offenders compared to fantasy-driven individuals (Holt et al., 2010). Additionally, contact-driven offenders are more likely to use illicit substances, have committed a sex crime, download child pornography, masturbate to child pornography, read erotic stories, and chat with others about their interest in children compared to fantasy-driven offenders (McCarthy, 2010). In contrast, fantasy-driven offenders are more likely to teach children about sexual behaviours, engage in exhibitionism with a webcam, masturbate in front of a child, and encourage a child to

masturbate and have cybersex (Briggs et al., 2011). An analysis of online conversations between contact-driven offenders and youth compared to fantasy-driven offenders found that contact-driven individuals were more likely to adopt a self-disclosure grooming tactic where they write online messages with first person pronouns and express both negative and positive emotions (Chiu et al., 2018). Such self-disclosure elicited more self-disclosure responses from targeted victims and increased feelings of trust to meet offline (Chiu et al., 2018).

As stated previously, differences have been found between online and offline offenders. For example, online offenders tend to be more educated than offline offenders (Quayle et al., 2014). A meta-analysis comparing online and offline offenders found that online offenders are more likely to be Caucasian males, younger, in a romantic relationship, and sexually deviant, while offline offenders were more likely to be unemployed and have less empathy for their victims (Babchishin et al., 2010). Victims are also more likely to know the offender in offline offenses whereas online offenders tend to be strangers (Black et al., 2015). In general, some researchers have found that child sex offenders are likely to have low self-esteem; problematic relationship building with adults; poor problem-solving abilities; and feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and humiliation (Robertiello & Terry, 2007; Seto et al., 2012). Offenders also tend to have difficulty expressing empathy (Canter & Youngs, 2012).

4.2 Motivations for Perpetration

Typologies of offline and online offenders have also been developed based on motivations. For example, Groth and colleagues (1982) identified the “regressed-fixated typologies” based on deep rooted deviant sexual behaviour and a psychological need to act. “Fixated” types are more likely to offend offline, have been attracted to children since adolescence, and are unable to stop being attracted to children (Robertiello & Terry, 2007). “Regressed” offenders, in contrast, are more likely to emerge in adulthood and exploit a child they have easy access to (e.g., in online chatrooms) (Robertiello & Terry, 2007). Another study found that convicted sex offenders demonstrated three motivational themes: intimacy-seeking, adaptable (i.e., motivation for intimacy or sex is context dependent), and hypersexual offenders (Webster et al., 2012).

The Pathways Model (Ward & Siegert, 2002) suggests that there are five pathways that can lead to the sexual assault of a child: 1) deviant sexual scripts, 2) intimacy deficits, 3) emotional dysregulation, 4) antisocial cognitions, and 5) multiple dysfunctional mechanisms. Among a sample of 72 convicted internet sex offenders, Middleton and colleagues (2006) found that 60% of the sample fell either into the intimacy-deficit or emotional dysregulation pathway of the Pathways Model. These results mirrored other studies that found loneliness, dissatisfaction, lack of intimacy, and management of negative emotions can motivate internet use specifically for sexual purposes (Elliot & Ashfield, 2011; Kloess et al., 2014).

Another set of typologies distinguishes between “situational” and “preferential” type sexual offenders (Lanning, 2012). “Situational” offenders can include adolescents who seek online pornography and engage in cybersexual interactions, as well as impulsive and curious adults

who have wider access to sexual content online (Lanning, 2012). “Preferential” offenders include paedophiles and individuals who offend when their inhibitions are weakened and their arousal is fuelled or validated (Lanning, 2012). Diverse offenders have also been identified, which includes individuals who display a variety of deviant sexual interests (Lanning, 2012).

5. Prevention and Intervention Strategies

In Canada, under the criminal code 172.1, luring a child under age 16 by means of a computer system for sexual purposes is a punishable offense (Justice Laws, 2021). However, there are problems and practical difficulties with the current legislation, including poor definitions and understanding of sexual grooming, lack of adequate coverage for non-internet grooming, difficulties in identifying sexual grooming, focus on offenders with previous sexual convictions rather than any person with a sexual interest in children, and failure of the legislation to be truly preventative (Craven et al., 2007). As such, some researchers have suggested adopting a public health approach to grooming prevention rather than the reactive approach that is more often utilized (Craven et al., 2007). There are five suggested points of prevention for addressing and identifying sexual grooming: 1) at the onset of their sexual interest in children, 2) as these potential offenders initiate self-grooming behaviour, 3) as they groom the environment and significant others, 4) once they start grooming the child, and 5) once grooming has occurred through working with identified offenders to prevent further offending (Craven et al., 2007). An example of a preventative intervention targeting offenders and potential offenders early in the grooming process is *Stop It Now* (for more information, visit <http://www.stopitnow.org.uk>). This intervention provides a free anonymous helpline for adults who have or are thinking about offending against a child, as well as for concerned adults who suspect a child has been or may be abused by an adult (Craven et al., 2007)⁴.

Because grooming behaviours often appear similar to those seen within general adult-child relationships (e.g., gift-giving) or occur in secrecy (e.g., sexual desensitization), many offenders successfully groom children and sexually abuse them without anyone noticing or intervening (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2020). Adequate knowledge of grooming can aid in accurate detection of grooming behaviours, though, and may prevent sexual abuse from occurring (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2020). Combatting common stereotypes of grooming is one way to aid in improving understanding (O’Leary et al., 2017). Common stereotypes include the idea that most perpetrators are strangers to the victim (McAlinden, 2006), children can be willing actors in abuse (Miller et al., 2014), most grooming occurs online (Craven et al., 2007), children are safe in institutions, perpetrators can be easily identified (Sullivan & Beech, 2002), and attentive parents can instinctively detect grooming and know when their child is in danger (Miller et al., 2014). Researchers have suggested that increasing public awareness and training people to accurately detect grooming behaviours and intervene in a timely manner could be an effective form of preventative intervention (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2020; Craven et al., 2007; Whittle et al., 2013a).

⁴ *Stop It Now* averaged 90 calls per month from 2003 to 2004, 75% of which were from adults motivated towards offending a child (Kemshall et al., 2004).

One note of caution regarding identification of grooming is that it can be difficult for people to process relevant information and reach accurate conclusions (O’Leary et al., 2017). For example, in a study where individuals were tested on their ability to detect grooming behaviour after the fact (they read a vignette that described a grooming scenario), participants evidenced hindsight bias (i.e., the inclination of a person to perceive an event as being predictable after the fact) as they greatly overestimated their ability to have identified the grooming behaviour had they witnessed it in real time (Winters & Jeglic, 2016). Wolak et al. (2008; 2010) provided a list of additional suggestions and cautions for grooming prevention and public policy intervention based on their assessment of the research literature. Similar suggestions have been provided by Finkelhor et al. (2020) in their peer-reviewed examination of prevention strategies and by UNICEF (2020) in their report on preventing child sexual exploitation and abuse. These suggestions are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Grooming-Related Prevention and Public Policy Suggestions (Finkelhor et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020; Wolak et al., 2008; 2010)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase recognition of the variety of grooming situations that exist, avoid descriptions of the problem: that characterize victims only as young children (i.e., include other at-risk groups like teenagers); that emphasize violence and deception over nonviolent grooming behaviours; and that focus solely on grooming by strangers as opposed to acquaintances and people close to them. • Ensure messaging does not imply victim-blaming and avoid the use of ineffective warning or fear-based messages. • Clearly state why sex with underage youth is wrong as not everyone may recognize the reasons, especially within societies that hypersexualize youth. It may be important to discuss power differences between youth and adults, the immaturity of youth and their lack of readiness for intimate relationships, and the potential negative impacts on victims. • Focus on parents as well as youth (including peers and bystanders), particularly in cases where youth may be less inclined to listen to parents, parents and youth are alienated from one another, or parents are uncomfortable talking to their children. • Ensure messages are developmentally appropriate and are focused on concerns relevant to youth and their normal feelings, urges, and curiosity (e.g., autonomy, romance, sex); develop and test messages within youths themselves. • Incorporate messaging about grooming into national curricula in schools and within broader programs focusing on healthy sexual development and avoiding victimization. • Include information about both online and offline grooming behaviours and dynamics. • Assess for a pattern of risky online behaviour among youth (e.g., posting personal information, interacting online with unknown people, having unknown people on a buddy list, using the internet to make rude and nasty comments to others, sending personal information to unknown people met online, downloading images from file-sharing programs, visiting X-rated sites intentionally, using the internet to embarrass or harass people youths are mad at, and talking online to unknown people about sex), and encourage youth to be wary when talking to unknown people online about sexual topics. Simple “do not talk to strangers” messaging may be seen as unrealistic to youth.

- Provide youth with candid, direct discussions about seduction and deliberate actions of adults who want to exploit youth, including criminal behaviour and child pornography.
- Remember that youth can be exploited by acquaintances and people close to them, not just strangers. Educational materials should take account of youths' possible dependence on those who may be abusing them and offer realistic reporting mechanisms to seek assistance outside of the family or caretaking relationship.

Prevention efforts focused on online grooming include cyber-safety websites and education programs; resources and information for parents/caregivers, educators, and others; and guidelines for youth-serving organizations (Wurtele et al., 2016). A list of reputable and evidence-based organizations and resources they have developed to educate youth, parents/caregivers, and educators on grooming is available in Appendix A of this report. While the number of educational websites and programs has increased, few have been rigorously evaluated (Finkelhor et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020). However, the limited evaluation data recommends the use of multi-session and multi-element programs that allow youth to contribute their views to the program content (Pound et al., 2016), explore values, discuss relationships, and practice interpersonal skills (e.g., how to respond to solicitations) (Haberland & Rogow, 2015). Researchers have also suggested that engaging and persistent internet safety lessons should be provided in schools, starting at a young age (Whittle et al., 2013a).

Conversations between parents and children about internet safety can also reduce online vulnerability of youth (Wurtele et al., 2016). Parental monitoring of youth internet use can also reduce risk of grooming (Whittle et al., 2013a). Youth victims of grooming have recommended that parents/caregivers get involved in their children's internet use, monitor their online activity, and keep access to the internet in open spaces rather than closed rooms (Whittle et al., 2013a). Whittle et al. suggest that discussions about why monitoring is necessary and how it will be implemented, as well as involving the children in decision-making process, can help with compliance and reduce negative feelings. Positive relationships between parents and children (e.g., closeness, open communication, parental monitoring) can also lead to youth engaging in fewer risky sexual behaviours online and offline (Wildsmith et al., 2013).

Teaching children about good and bad touching, their right to say no, and the potential harms associated with keeping secrets are also preventative options (Craven et al., 2007). Prevention interventions focused on children are somewhat controversial, though, as they put the onus on children rather than the adults who offend (Craven et al., 2007). That being said, any grooming prevention strategies targeting children and youth should be developmentally appropriate, direct, and acknowledge normal interests in romance and sex, especially since grooming strategies often mimic normal relationship development behaviours (Wolak et al., 2010). Prevention strategies should raise awareness, help children develop avoidance skills, and educate youth on the pitfalls and criminality of sexual/romantic relations with adults (Wolak et al., 2010). Prevention strategies should also target higher risk youth, including those with histories of sexual abuse, sexual orientation concerns, and risk-taking behaviours (Wolak et al., 2010).

In addition to education and resources, prevention efforts should also include a focus on organizations and institutions in which children and youth spend a lot of time. Given the accessibility and potential vulnerability of children in schools, several policy steps have been suggested, including: more rigorous screening and staff selection; detailed rules governing teacher-student interactions (online and offline); regular training on educator sexual misconduct for parents, students, and educators; specific education on respecting boundaries and avoiding boundary invasions; and whistleblower protection for individuals who report breaches of conduct (Higgins et al., 2016; Knoll, 2010; Palmer, 2016; Patterson & Austin, 2006; Wurtele et al., 2019). Codes of conduct or professional standards for working with children may also be developed (O’Leary et al., 2017). Policies that assist individuals in reporting policy breaches are also essential (Knoll, 2010; Wortley & Smallbone, 2011). Some researchers note that identifying and disclosing suspected grooming is the responsibility of all and can increase the likelihood of grooming being identified and addressed (Erooga, 2012; Sullivan et al., 2011). Value Based Interviewing is one method for screening attitudes towards safeguarding children as it provides in-depth information about attitudes, character, and behaviour at work (Kaufman & Erooga, 2016). Table 5 outlines recommended prevention strategies for schools.

Table 5. Recommended Prevention Strategies for Schools (Fauske et al., 2006; Shakeshaft, 2005; Sutton, 2004)

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District and school level policies prohibiting educator grooming and sexual misconduct • Standardizing hiring practices • Standardized screening methods and criminal background checks • Standardized investigative practices in response to allegations • Development of a centralized reporting agency and registry • Reporting of all allegations to law enforcement and child protective services • Regular training on educator sexual misconduct and prevention • Enact statutes on educator sexual misconduct and prevention |
|---|

Institutional and organizational culture is also relevant in terms of child grooming as it can inadvertently support, endorse, or normalize grooming behaviours (e.g., sporting club culture where physical contact between staff and athletes is considered normal) (Higgins et al., 2016; Palmer, 2016). Broad social dysfunction within an organization can also increase the likelihood of grooming (Erooga, 2012). Setting behavioural expectations and training staff to understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour can help shift institutional culture (Higgins et al., 2016; Palmer, 2016). Effective leadership is integral to conveying cultural norms and setting standards of appropriate behaviour (Palmer, 2016). Further, there are various processes that can be implemented to facilitate reporting of suspected grooming behaviours and to effectively manage such reports (Erooga, 2009; Knoll, 2010; Leclerc et al., 2011; O’Leary et al., 2017).

Table 6. Measures and Processes to Facilitate Reports of Suspected Grooming (O’Leary et al., 2017)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Widely disseminated and visible policies regarding clear behavioural expectations• Avenues that facilitate staff reporting of inappropriate behaviour• Specific staff roles in institutions with the authority to investigate allegations• Consistent management responses to concerns raised by staff members and others |
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As children spend a significant amount of time outside the home, particularly pre-adolescents and adolescents, prevention and intervention efforts require more than a focus on youth/parental education and parental monitoring. Cultural and organizational efforts, like those detailed above, are also necessary.

6. Conclusions

Understanding and identifying grooming is essential for addressing child sexual abuse and exploitation. As online and media technology has improved and become more accessible, grooming processes have extended into the online realm. This has resulted in more opportunities for youth to be targeted by grooming and sexual abuse perpetrators. Being groomed primarily affects various aspects of youths’ mental health; if sexual abuse occurs, the effects can increase. There are a wide variety of strategies that can be employed for improving detection and cessation of grooming, such as training interventions; school-based policy development and application; changing institutional or organizational culture; and educating youth, parents, and educators about online safety. In order to prevent grooming and sexual abuse, and to mitigate the effects after such abuse has occurred, holistic efforts are needed from educators, parents/caregivers, and wider society.

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Appendix A: Grooming Resources for Parents/Caregivers, Educators, and Youth

American Bar Association (ABA)

<https://www.americanbar.org/>

The ABA is “committed to advancing the rule of law across the United States and beyond by providing practical resources for legal professionals, law school accreditation, model ethics codes and more.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Understanding Sexual Grooming in Child Abuse Cases -

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-34/november-2015/understanding-sexual-grooming-in-child-abuse-cases/

Contents of resource: key elements of sexual grooming; where grooming occurs; defining grooming; grooming behaviours; legally protecting victims from sexual grooming

Canadian Centre for Child Protection

<https://www.protectchildren.ca/en/>

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection is “a national charity dedicated to the personal safety of all children. Our goal is to reduce the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, assist in the location of missing children, and prevent child victimization through a number of programs, services, and resources for Canadian families, educators, child-serving organizations, law enforcement, and other parties.”

Country of origin: Canada

Resources intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): report, online video, online training program

Resource title and url: Understanding Child Sexual Abuse (report) -

https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsResources_UnderstandingChildSexualAbuse_en.pdf

Contents of resource: scope of child sexual abuse; what child sexual abuse is; how the grooming process works; impacts of the abuse; tips for parents/guardians on how to handle disclosure

Resource title and url: Commit to Kids: An Introduction to Safeguarding Children from Sexual Abuse (online video) - <https://protectchildren.ca/en/get-involved/online-training/commit-to-kids-intro-safeguarding-children/>

Contents of resource: 23 min. video; scope of child sexual abuse; barriers to disclosure; grooming and boundary transgressions; how you can help safeguard children from sexual abuse

Resource title and url: Commit to Kids: Online Training (online training program) -

<https://www.protectchildren.ca/en/get-involved/online-training/commit-to-kids/>

Contents of resource: defining child sexual abuse; the grooming process; handling disclosures of child sexual abuse; the impact of child sexual abuse; creating a Child Protection Code of Conduct for your organization; policies and procedures to use to protect children in your organization

Canadian Red Cross

<https://www.redcross.ca/>

The Canadian Red Cross is “the leading humanitarian organization through which people voluntarily demonstrate their caring for others in need.”

Country of origin: Canada

Resources intended primarily for: educators

Resource type(s): training program, webpage

Resource title and url: Be Safe! Training Kit (training program) - https://shop-magasiner.redcross-croixrouge.ca/product/1865/be-safe-kit?_ga=2.203766608.1950814484.1638823894-316857520.1638823894&_gl=1*fqkabz*_ga*MzE2ODU3NTIwLjE2Mzg4MjM4OTQ.*_ga_376D8LHM0R*MTYzODgyMzg5My4xLjEuMTYzODgyMzkxMS4w

Contents of resource: teaching kit to deliver Be Safe! program to children aged 5-9 years to promote children’s personal safety by preventing sexual abuse

Resource title and url: Kids’ Safety Online; Online Dangers and How to Keep Kids Safe Online (webpage)- <https://www.redcross.ca/how-we-help/violence-bullying-and-abuse-prevention/parents/kids-safety-online>

Contents of resource: warning signs your child may be unsafe online; how parents can keep kids safe online; 10 cyber-safety tips for parents and caregivers; safety tips for social networking sites; what to do if you suspect sexual exploitation online

Centre Against Sexual Violence

<https://www.casv.org.au/>

The Centre Against Sexual Violence Inc. (CASV) is “a community based sexual assault service dedicated to providing counselling, education and information.”

Country of origin: Australia

Resources intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Sexual Grooming (webpage) - <http://www.casv.org.au/grooming/>

Contents of resource: what is sexual grooming; stages of grooming; recognising the signs of grooming; why don’t children tell; how to protect your child

Center for Behavioural Intervention, Beaverton, Oregon & Department for Children and Families

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/>

The mission of the Department of Children and Families “is to foster the healthy development, safety, well-being and self-sufficiency of Vermonters.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): factsheet

Resource title and url: Protecting Your Children: Advice from Child Molesters (factsheet) - <https://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/Prevention/docs/Protecting-Children.pdf>

Contents of resource: what is child sexual abuse; who are child molesters; who is the typical child molester; how child molesters gain access to your child; why don’t child molesters always get caught; prevention; indications that a child is being molested; where you can get help

Child Crime Prevention & Safety Center

<https://childsafety.losangelescriminallawyer.pro/>

A webpage devoted to providing information on unique issues that affect juveniles in connection with the law.

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Children and Grooming/Online Predators (webpage) -

<https://childsafety.losangelescriminallawyer.pro/children-and-grooming-online-predators>

Contents of resource: statistics about grooming and online predators; how online predators operate; signs a child is being groomed online; legal consequences for online predators

Child Lures Prevention

<https://childluresprevention.com/>

Child Lures Prevention is “here to help you prevent crimes against children and youth through education and awareness. Together, we can make this a safer and gentler world for children.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators, youth

Resource type(s): webpage, training programs

Resource title and url: A Profile of the Child Molester (webpage) -

<https://childluresprevention.com/resources/molester-profile/>

Contents of resource: child molester demographics and prevalence; percentage of child abuse committed by family members; kids and teens using problem sexual behaviour with other children; females as molesters; most common lure used by child molesters; how child molesters gain access to victims; how sex offenders lure kids online; other ways child molesters use the Internet; how child molesters target their victims; when and where most sexual assaults happen; detection of a child molester; victim disclosure; how to protect children; very important person factor

Childnet International

<https://www.childnet.com/>

Childnet’s mission is “to work in partnership with others around the world to help make the internet a great and safe place for children.”

Country of origin: United Kingdom

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): webpages

Resource title and url: Online Grooming (webpage) - <https://www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/hot-topics/online-grooming>

Contents of resource: what is online grooming; how online grooming happens; who is at risk; links to specific resources for how to support children of all ages (3-7 years olds, 7-11 years olds, 11-14 years olds, and 14-18 year olds)

Committee for Children

<https://www.cfchildren.org/>

Committee for Children is “a global non-profit who champions the safety and well-being of kids through social-emotional learning (SEL) to fulfill their vision of safe children thriving in a peaceful world.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): factsheet

Resource title and url: How to Talk with Kids About Personal Safety and Sexual Abuse (factsheet) - <https://www.cfchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/child-abuse-prevention/docs/all-ages-sexual-abuse-prevention-conversation-guide.pdf>

Contents of resource: tips for talking to children; best practices; what the research says; talking tips by age; words to know; simple safety rules

Cybertip

<https://www.cybertip.ca/en/>

Cybertip.ca is “dedicated to reducing child victimization through technology, education, public awareness, along with supporting survivors and their families.”

Country of origin: Canada

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Child Sexual Abuse: Online Grooming (webpage) - <https://www.cybertip.ca/en/child-sexual-abuse/grooming/>

Contents of resource: defining online grooming; prevalence of online grooming; online and offline grooming; prevention tips

Darkness to Light

<https://www.d2l.org/>

Darkness to Light’s work is “guided by the vision of a world free from child sexual abuse. We envision a world in which adults form prevention-oriented communities that protect the child’s right to a healthy childhood.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resources intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): webpages with links to videos and online training

Resource title and url: Grooming and Red Flag Behaviours (webpage) - <https://www.d2l.org/child-grooming-signs-behavior-awareness/>

Contents of resource: video where survivors discuss grooming and how their offenders gained access to them; stages of grooming table; recognizing red flag behaviour

Resource title and url: Bystander Intervention: How Far Would You Go to Rescue a Child? (webpage) - <https://www.d2l.org/bystander-intervention-child-protection/>

Contents of resource: what is a bystander; barriers facing bystanders; impact of bystander intervention; examples of active bystanding; link to 30-minute bystander intervention training

Resource title and url: Safety from Online Exploitation (webpage) - <https://www.d2l.org/safety-online-exploitation/>

Contents of resource: summary of the UN Women and OSCE study that addresses human trafficking trends and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; steps to prevent online exploitation

ECPAT International

<https://ecpat.org/>

ECPAT is “focused on ending the sexual exploitation of children, with a membership of 122 civil society organisations in 104 countries.”

Country of origin: Thailand

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): booklet

Resource title and url: Online Child Exploitation: A Common Misunderstanding (booklet) -

https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SECO-Booklet_ebook-1.pdf

Contents of resource: child sexual abuse/exploitation material; online grooming for sexual purposes; sexting; sexual extortion; live online child sexual abuse or live streaming of child sexual abuse; legal aspects of crime; Internet and technology information

Government of Canada

<https://www.canada.ca/en.html>

Official Government of Canada website with links to various reports.

Country of origin: Canada

Resource intended primarily for: youth, parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Online Grooming: What It Is and How to Protect Yourself (ages 15-17 years)

(webpage) - <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/campaigns/online-child-sexual-exploitation/resources-for-educators/toolkit-for-youth-aged-15-17/fact-sheet-for-youth-aged-15-17-online-grooming.html>

Contents of resource: what is online grooming; how does it happen; what you can do

Resource title and url: Online Grooming: What It Is and What You Can Do About It (ages 10-12 years)

(webpage) - <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/campaigns/online-child-sexual-exploitation/resources-for-educators/toolkit-for-youth-aged-10-12/fact-sheet-for-youth-aged-10-12-online-grooming.html>

Contents of resource: what is online grooming; how does it happen; what you can do

Resource title and url: Online Grooming: What It Is and What You Can Do About It (ages 13-14 years)

(webpage) - <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/campaigns/online-child-sexual-exploitation/resources-for-educators/toolkit-for-youth-aged-13-14/fact-sheet-for-youth-aged-13-14-online-grooming.html>

Contents of resource: what is online grooming; how does it happen; what you can do

Innocent Lives Foundation

<https://www.innocentlivesfoundation.org/>

Innocent Lives Foundation’s mission is “to identify anonymous child predators to help bring them to justice.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Everything You Need to Know About Online Grooming (webpage) -

<https://www.innocentlivesfoundation.org/everything-you-need-to-know-about-online-grooming/>

Contents of resource: defining grooming; online grooming explained; goals of predators; when predator’s goal is online sexual abuse; when the predator wants to meet in real life; your loved one’s behaviour and indications of grooming

International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children

<https://www.icmec.org/>

“We envision a world where children can grow up safe from exploitation, sexual abuse, or risk of going missing.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): factsheet

Resource title and url: Behaviours of Sexual Predators: Grooming (factsheet) -

<https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Behaviors-of-Sexual-Predators-Grooming.pdf>

Contents of resource: common grooming behaviours of predators

Kids Help Phone

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

Kids Help Phone is “Canada’s only 24/7, national support service. We offer professional counselling, information and referrals and volunteer-led, text-based support to young people in both English and French.”

Country of origin: Canada

Resource intended primarily for: youth

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: What is Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse? (webpage) -

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/what-online-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/>

Contents of resource: what is online exploitation and abuse; how do I know if I’m being sexually exploited and abused online; types of online sexual exploitation and abuse (e.g., grooming); how to deal with online sexual exploitation and abuse; if a photo/video of you has been shared without your permission; reporting online sexual exploitation and abuse; if you’re in immediate danger

Resource title and url: Help a Friend with Online Sexual Exploitation & Abuse (webpage) -

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/help-friend-online-sexual-exploitation-abuse/>

Contents of resource: a list of tips for helping a friend dealing with online sexual exploitation and abuse

Michigan State University

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/outreach/>

Michigan State University (MSU) Extension “helps people improve their lives by bringing the vast knowledge resources of MSU directly to individuals, communities and businesses.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): factsheet

Resource title and url: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators (factsheet) -

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/creating-safe-environments/uploads/files/Final%20-%20Preventing%20Grooming.pdf>

Contents of resource: what is grooming; how can you prevent grooming; talk about secrets; listen, listen, and listen some more; teach your child to be assertive; be wary of charmers; teach your child about consent and relationships; show up physically & emotionally for your child; be involved in your child’s interactions with others; know where your child is; tune in to virtual environments; think critically about the information you share about your child; take care of your family; additional resource suggestions

MY Child Safety Institute

<https://mychildsafetyinstitute.org/>

Magen Yeladim Child Safety Institute is “a non-profit organization whose goal is to provide an environment for every child that is safe from the dangers of abuse through education and hands-on training that empowers children and adults with the knowledge and skills to prevent abuse at every turn. MY Child Safety Institute is a think tank and leader in further researching and developing innovative community resource and support programs as a response to current community needs.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): factsheet

Resource title and url: The Six Stages of Grooming (factsheet) - <https://mychildsafetyinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/YSix-stages-of-grooming.pdf>

Contents of resource: stages of grooming; tools for parental prevention

National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children

<https://www.missingkids.org/home>

“As the nation's non-profit clearinghouse and comprehensive reporting center for all issues related to the prevention of and recovery from child victimization, NCMEC leads the fight against abduction, abuse, and exploitation - because every child deserves a safe childhood.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: youth

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Resources for Survivors of Sexual Abuse Material (webpage) -

<https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/csam-resources>

Contents of resource: overview; reporting; emotional & peer support; removing online content

National Sexual Violence Resource Center

<https://www.nsvrc.org/>

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) is “the leading nonprofit in providing information and tools to prevent and respond to sexual violence. NSVRC translates research and trends into best practices that help individuals, communities and service providers achieve real and lasting change.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Resources (webpage) -

<https://www.nsvrc.org/preventing-child-sexual-abuse-resources>

Contents of resource: what is child sexual abuse; sexuality and child development; what you can do; shifting cultural norms; education and training materials; additional resources

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>

NSPCC “provides all the child protection tools, online courses, and resources you need to keep children safe.”

Country of origin: United Kingdom

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, youth

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: What Parents Need to Know about Sexual Grooming (webpage) -

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/grooming/>

Contents of resource: what is grooming; signs of grooming; effects of grooming; reporting grooming; preventing grooming; types of grooming; if a child reveals abuse; who’s at risk; supports for parents, children, and young people; help if you’re worried about your behaviour

Protect Us Kids

<https://www.protect-us-kids.org/>

The focus of Protect Us Kids is “to provide youth from national and international, under served and rural communities, with critical life-saving tools on how to navigate cyberspace without falling victim to child predators and exploiters. This includes, but not limited to, child protection and internet safety, cyber security awareness and education, identify human trafficking methods that have been enabled via technology, and establish strategic partnerships with other organizations to identify key technological and human indicators that lead to exploitation.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): webpage, link to videos

Resource title and url: Web of Darkness: Grooming, Manipulated, Coerced, and Abused in Minutes (webpage) - <https://www.biometrica.com/icmec-online-grooming/>

Contents of resource: what is online grooming; how does online grooming happen; why are social networking sites used by predators; video on grooming; how does an offender approach a child; what is the impact of online grooming; how often does online grooming occur; video on predators; what is “sextortion”; is online grooming illegal

Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN)

<https://www.rainn.org/>

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is “the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers, educators

Resource type(s): webpage with links to personal stories of victims

Resource title and url: Grooming: Know the Warning Signs (webpage) -

<https://www.rainn.org/news/grooming-know-warning-signs>

Contents of resource: grooming behaviours; grooming family and community; online grooming; links to survivors’ stories; how to help

Saskatoon Sexual Assault & Information Centre

<https://ssaic.ca/>

SSAIC is “a Saskatoon-based, non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to taking a leadership role in responding to sexualized violence in our community.”

Country of origin: Canada

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Grooming (webpage) - <https://ssaic.ca/learning-resources/child-sexual-abuse-what-is-grooming/>

Contents of resource: what is grooming; stages of grooming; breaking the cycle; what to do if you suspect a child is being groomed

Thorn

<https://www.thorn.org/>

Thorn “houses the first engineering and data science team focused solely on developing new technologies to combat online child sexual abuse. We are able to quickly assess whether new technologies can be repurposed to protect children from sexual exploitation through one of our three strategic pillars: 1) accelerating victim identification 2) equipping platforms, and 3) empowering the public.”

Country of origin: United States of America

Resource intended primarily for: parents/caregivers

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Online Grooming: What It Is, How It Happens, and How to Defend Children (webpage) - <https://www.thorn.org/blog/online-grooming-what-it-is-how-it-happens-and-how-to-defend-children/>

Contents of resource: what is online grooming; what do parents and caregivers need to know about online grooming; an online world; put yourself in their shoes; build trust all of the time

Victoria State Government: Education and Training

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>

The Department of Education and Training “offers learning and development support and services for all Victorians.”

Country of origin: Australia

Resource intended primarily for: educators

Resource type(s): webpage

Resource title and url: Child Sexual Exploitation and Grooming (webpage) - <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/childprotection/Pages/expolitationgrooming.aspx>

Contents of resource: defining child sexual exploitation; identifying the signs; how sexual exploitation happens; grooming; how grooming happens; identify the signs; most at risk; identify perpetrators of child sexual exploitation; report child sexual exploitation and grooming; talk to children about sexual exploitation; more information/resources