Grooming for the Purposes of Exploitation and Abuse: Evidence Summary and Helpful Resources

Child sexual abuse is a serious issue in Canada and is often proceeded by grooming. Grooming is an approach, or preparatory process, used by perpetrators to aid them in exploiting and abusing children. Grooming may take place in the real-world setting, online, or both. Knowledge of grooming is necessary for early detection of grooming behaviours and to develop prevention measures for sexual abuse and related negative harms.

How common is grooming?

While the prevalence of grooming is difficult to assess, studies have shown that:

- approximately 50% of child sex offenders use some form of grooming prior to abusing victims
- 5 – 24% of adolescents have been victims of grooming
- 74% of reported online grooming cases progressed offline (i.e., the child met the perpetrator in person)
- girls are more likely than boys to report being victims of grooming both online and offline

Online grooming is associated with:

- frequent social media use
- social media and communication technology that is not monitored by caregivers
- chatrooms and instant messaging platforms that allow perpetrators to modify their identity and maintain anonymity

Consequences of Grooming

Grooming can have both short- and long-term negative outcomes for victims. It is important to note that children and youth may not perceive grooming behaviours as unwanted or violating which can lead to complicated feelings. It is important that victims of grooming are provided with appropriate support to deal with their feelings and other potential negative outcomes. Potential negative outcomes of grooming include:

- *Cognitive and emotional*: difficulties sleeping and concentrating, being withdrawn, feelings of shame and guilt, self blame, loss of identity
- *Mental health*: anxiety, depression, body dysmorphia and eating disorders, post-traumatic stress, self-harm and suicidal thoughts, problematic substance use
- *Interpersonal*: uncommunicative, distrust in others
- *Sexual and reproductive health*: sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy (when grooming results in sexual abuse)

> **Grooming behaviours are often subtle and difficult to detect. It is important to remember that the blame for grooming and abuse should only be placed on the offender, never the child, caregiver, or other trusted adults.**

The Grooming Process

Grooming often involves seemingly normal behaviours and acts that are not criminal or abusive on their own. This can make it challenging to identify when a child is being groomed. Grooming often involves some, if not all, of the following stages.

Stage 1: Targeting the Victim

Child sex offenders have reported that vulnerability and consistent access to the child are the most important factors in selecting a victim. Vulnerabilities include the need for affection, marginalization, early traumatization (e.g., neglect or abuse), mental health difficulties, disability (e.g., physical, mental, or learning), exclusion from peer groups, and family dysfunction. Individuals close to the victim may also be groomed to reduce the chance of being reported and to decrease the believability of a victim if a perpetrator is reported.

Stage 2: Gaining the Victim's Trust

The perpetrator builds a special relationship with the child and gets to know their needs. This involves building trust, making the child feel special, providing attention and appreciation, sharing interests, and giving gifts. This stage may involve breaking rules that the child's caregivers have set or providing drugs or alcohol to create the need for keeping secrets.

Stage 3: Filling a Need

The perpetrator looks for opportunities to be helpful and may work to gain the trust of caregivers by identifying and filling needs for the child so they can gain access (e.g., childcare, tutoring, or teaching a skill). The perpetrator may become integrated into a community, adopting roles in positions of trust and proximity to the child.

Stage 4: Isolating the Child

After developing a special relationship with the child, the perpetrator creates situations for them to be alone with the child, further reinforcing their connection.

Stage 5: Sexualizing the Relationship

After a trusting relationship has been created, the perpetrator may slowly introduce sexual themes into the relationship with the child to desensitize them to sexual activities. It may start with seemingly innocent encounters (e.g., "accidentally" walking in on a child undressing), gradually progressing to intrusion of physical boundaries. The perpetrator may show pornographic material to the child in an attempt to normalize sexual behaviour. Online grooming may involve playing online sex games, sexual talk, and eventually sexual activities such as performing sexual acts via webcam or activities in-person.

Stage 6: Maintaining Control

After sexual abuse has occurred, the perpetrator uses manipulation strategies such as secrecy, threats, and violence to maintain the child's silence. The perpetrator may threaten to end the relationship, ending the benefits the child receives from the relationship (e.g., gifts, emotional support).

Signs of Grooming and/or Sexual Abuse

It is important to note that perpetrators of child sexual abuse are often found in positions of trust and authority (e.g., family members, family friends, teachers, religious leaders, coaches).

Signs an adult may be grooming a child

- Obvious or inappropriate preferential treatment of child
- Excessive time spent alone with child, outside group activities and in private spaces
- 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 and flirtatious behaviour around child
- Other children suspect, make jokes or references about inappropriate behaviour

Signs a child may be experiencing grooming/sexual abuse[1]

- *Behavioural signs*: excessive talk about or knowledge of sexual topics; sexual behaviour that is inappropriate for the child's age; having new items that are not accounted for (e.g., money, gifts, devices); spending an unusual amount of time online, alone, or in certain areas of the home (e.g., the bathroom or bedroom); regressive behaviours that were previously outgrown (e.g., bed wetting, thumb sucking)
- *Emotional signs*: change in eating habits, excessive worry, increase in unexplained health problems (e.g., stomach aches, headaches), difficulties sleeping, self-harm behaviours, decreased interest in school or activities
- *Physical signs*: sexually transmitted infections, signs of trauma to the genital area (e.g., unexplained bleeding, bruising, or blood on sheets, underwear, or clothing), persistent or reoccurring pain with urination or bowel movements

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

- **For Children and Youth:** internet safety lessons in schools beginning at a young age; teaching children about consent, good and bad touch, their right to say 'no', and the potential harms associated with keeping secrets
- **For Caregivers and the Public:** increase public awareness about grooming, including how to detect grooming behaviours; regular conversations between caregivers and youth about internet safety; parental monitoring of youth internet use; keeping technology in shared spaces (e.g., in the living room/common living spaces)
- **For Organizations (particularly in child- and youth-centred spaces):** more rigorous screening and staff selection; detailed rules governing adult-child interactions (online and offline); specific education on respecting boundaries and avoiding boundary invasions; readily available and well-defined policies for reporting inappropriate behaviours and protection for individuals who make a report

Duty to Report

Everyone has a duty to report suspected child abuse according to the Child and Family Services Act. The report does not require proof and can be based on personal observation, discussion with a child, assumptions, or credible second-hand information. For more information visit, https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/justice-crime-and-the-law/child-protection/child-abuse-and-neglect.

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[1] For further information visit, https://www.rainn.org/articles/warning-signs-young-children and https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/campaigns/online-child-sexual-exploitation/key-resources.html.

Additional Information and Resources

Canadian Centre for Child Protection
Understanding Child Sexual Abuse (Report)
https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsResources_UnderstandingChildSexualAbuse_en.pdf
Commit to Kids (Online trainings)
https://www.protectchildren.ca/en/get-involved/online-training/commit-to-kids/

Cybertip
Canada's national tipline for reporting the online sexual exploitation of children.
https://www.cybertip.ca/en/

Government of Canada
Online Dangers: Grooming (webpage)
https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/campaigns/online-child-sexual-exploitation/grooming.html
Online Child Sexual Exploitation (age-appropriate toolkits for educators)
https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/campaigns/online-child-sexual-exploitation/resources-for-educators.html

Kids Help Phone
What is Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse? (webpage)
https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/what-online-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/
Help a Friend with Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse? (webpage)
https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/help-friend-online-sexual-exploitation-abuse/

Saskatoon Sexual Assault and Information Centre
Resources on sexualized violence, child abuse, grooming, and education and prevention programs.
https://ssaic.ca/learning-resources/

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute
Grooming for the Purposes of Exploitation and Abuse: A Literature Review (report, including a comprehensive list of resources for caregivers, educators, and youth)
https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/grooming-for-the-purposes-of-exploitation-and-abuse-a-literature-review/
Teaching Healthy Relationships (booklet)
https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/building-healthy-relationships-yes-that-includes-dating-relationships/
Teaching Healthy Online Relationships (booklet)
https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/building-healthy-online-relationships/