

Grooming

Following recent instances of sexual abuse in Rotherham and Oxford, national attention has focused on how abusers groom children for sexual abuse –online and off. What do parents need to know about the grooming process?

What is grooming?

In this context, grooming means forming a relationship or connection with a child for the purpose of sexually abusing them.

Some abusers also ‘groom’ young people’s families –getting easier access to children by gaining the trust of their parents and carers.

Fortunately it’s not very common –only one in 58 UK children will be sexually abused by an unrelated adult –but it does happen and it’s worth knowing the signs.

How it happens

Sexual abuse can happen to boys or girls, to children living at home in a rural or urban environment and to children of any social background.

Abusers:

- Are good at building relationships with children and the adults who care about them.
- Target families and parents who are facing other difficulties.
- Offer support with childcare and other parenting responsibilities.
- Seek out positions of trust which put them in contact with children.
- Go to places where children spend time.
- Build networks of young people and target children through their friends.
- Can use a mix of affection, violence, lies, blackmail, threats and gifts to groom a child and conceal abuse.

Warning signs

Abuse is often difficult to detect, not least because the idea is so upsetting. Here are some of the most common warning signs of sexual abuse and grooming:

- Mood swings, secrecy, dramatic personality changes.
- Ending friendships and associating with new friends (especially older people).
- Staying out late/all night, getting defensive about what they were doing when questioned.
- Going missing from home or care.
- Getting unusual calls, texts or messages.
- Having more than one phone or duplicate social media accounts (i.e. two Facebook profiles).
- Being overly secretive about their phone or other devices, not wanting to be without them.
- Changes in tastes, clothing, appearance, vocabulary.
- Answering to a new nickname or street name.

- Skipping school.
- Involvement in offending.
- Worsening mental/physical health, looking tired or ill.
- Sleeping at strange times.
- Having new items they shouldn't be able to afford –like jewellery or a new phone.
- Physical injuries and/or sexual health problems.

Some of these things are fairly normal examples of teenage behaviour, and some can also be warning signs for other issues. If your child displays behaviours on this list it doesn't necessarily mean they're being groomed or abused –but you may want to look into it, especially if they show multiple signs.

What to do

There's a lot you can do to protect your child, whether or not you have specific worries.

- Talk to your child about healthy and unhealthy relationships and make sure they know they can come to you with questions or concerns.
- Show an interest in what your child does online and try to keep up to date with the tech they use.
- Watch for the warning signs.
- Talk to your child's teacher if you're worried.
- Get support from specialist organisations like Pace, the NSPCC and Parents Protect.
- Keep a record of any suspicious activity and report it to the police.
- Never confront an abuser yourself –this could put you and your child in greater danger.
- Trust your instincts. As a parent, if you've noticed worrying behaviour from your child or someone in their life, it's probably worth looking into.

Reporting

If you think someone is trying to groom or sexually exploit a child online, you should contact CEOP. <https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>

The Parents Protect Stop it Now! Helpline offers immediate, confidential help and support. <http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/stop-it-now-uk-and-ireland.htm>

Sexual images of a child anywhere online should be reported to the Internet Watch Foundation. <https://www.iwf.org.uk/>

If your child is in immediate danger you should always call 999.

Always contact the police if your child goes missing from home or school. If you believe your child is being groomed or sexually abused, you should be very clear about your suspicions and ask to be referred to a specialist child sexual exploitation team.