

Would you spot a child at risk of grooming?

The process of 'grooming' is used by adults with a sexual interest in children. Often these adults will trick children into sharing personal information or sexual imagery, performing sexual acts over the internet or meeting them in person.

Children and young people can be groomed online or in the real world, by a man or a woman, or by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional.

Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed, or that what has happened is abuse.

How grooming happens

Groomers will hide their true intentions and may spend a long time gaining a child's trust. They may also try to gain the trust of the whole family so they can be alone with the child. Groomers do this by:

- pretending to be someone they are not, for example saying they are the same age online
- offering advice or understanding
- buying gifts
- giving the child attention
- using their professional position or reputation
- taking them on trips, outings or holidays.
- using secrets and intimidation to control children
- using social media sites, instant messaging apps including teen dating apps, or online gaming platforms to connect with a young person or child.

Groomers' tactics to watch out for

Tactic	Intent
"Let's go private."	Engage in private conversation through a separate chat room, instant messaging or phone texting.
"Where's your computer in the house?"	Determine if adults are in close proximity.
"Who's your favourite band? Designer? Film?"	Discover what types of gifts to offer e.g. concert tickets, clothing, CDs.
"I know someone who can get you a modelling job."	Flattery
"I know a way you can earn money fast."	Appeal to a young person's natural interest in earning money.
"You seem sad. Tell me what's bothering you."	Show sympathy to encourage child to confide in groomer and potentially pull them away from family support.
"What's your phone number?"	Establish off-line contact – usually happens at a later stage, after the target feels comfortable with the groomer.
"If you don't... (do what I ask), I'll ...(tell your parents/carers or share your photos online."	Intimidation and manipulation – used as the groomer learns more and more about the target
"You are the love of my life."	Manipulation – becoming appealing to someone by making him/her feel special and building companionship.

Talk to your child/young person about these tactics so they know to inform you if they ever encounter them.

Who is at risk of grooming?

US research suggest that young people experiencing depression, loneliness or social isolation or who have experienced negative life events or maltreatment, may be more at risk, as are those seeking sexual advice or information online.

In 2012, 12 focus groups with young people in the UK, Belgium and Italy identified 3 broad categories of victims of online grooming:

•**Resilient individuals** - are those who act safely and are able to fend off approaches.

•**Risk takers** - seek adventure and may be disinhibited. They may engage in multiple risky activities (for example, befriending unknown people online, looking at pornography, being rude or nasty online). They may be open to blackmail by groomers if they can be persuaded to disclose some initial information or images.

•**Vulnerable individuals** - seek 'love' on the internet and may be particularly susceptible to advances framed in those terms. They may have low self-esteem, which may make interventions difficult since they resist disclosure and believe that they have a 'true' relationship, and are not a victim at all.

How to tell if a child is being groomed

There are a number of tell-tale signs or indicators that a child is being groomed for sexual exploitation. These include:

- secretiveness and unwillingness to talk about what they're up to on the computer/phone etc.
- long hours spent in their room online.
- going missing for periods of time or regularly returning home late. Unhappy and lonely young people can be flattered and seduced by the attention of streetwise adults who appear to sympathise with them.
- dis-engagement from education: young people who are not in school during the day may be more at risk of sexual exploitation. Children who are becoming involved in this activity may begin to skip school or become disruptive.
- appearing with unexplained gifts or new possessions: children who appear to have new clothes, jewellery, mobile phones or money that cannot plausibly be accounted for.
- peers and friends: association with other young people involved in exploitation and with older boyfriends/girlfriends.
- sexual health issues: a history of unprotected sex leading to sexually transmitted infections or inappropriate sexual behaviour.
- changes in temperament/depression: mood swings or changes in emotional well-being can be related to being involved in sexual exploitation.

- drug and alcohol misuse: this may leave children more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and abusers may use drugs and alcohol to help control children.
- displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviours, such as being over-familiar with strangers or sending sexualised images via the internet or mobile phones.
- involvement in exploitative relationships or association with risky adults.

If you know or suspect that a foster child is being sexually exploited or groomed, you should report your concerns to the child's social worker and your supervising social worker. It is helpful if you can record reasons for your concerns, giving examples of behaviours that have caused you to suspect this.

The 31 internet acronyms EVERY parent and carer needs to know

Teens are now using their own secret language by using the following online abbreviations:

Code	Meaning
IWSN	I want sex now
GNOC	Get naked on camera
NIFOC	Naked in front of computer
PIR	Parent in room
CU46	See you for sex
53X	Sex
9	Parent watching
99	Parent gone
1174	Party meeting place
THOT	That hoe over there
CID	Acid (the drug)
Broken	Hungover from alcohol
420	Marijuana
POS	Parent over shoulder
SUGARPIC	Suggestive or erotic photo
KOTL	Kiss on the lips

(L)MIRL	Let's meet in real life
PRON	Porn
TDTM	Talk dirty to me
8	Oral sex
CD9	Parents around/Code 9
IPN	I'm posting naked
LH6	Let's have sex
WTTP	Want to trade pictures?
DOC	Drug of choice
TWD	Texting while driving
GYPO	Get your pants off
KPC	Keeping parents clueless
LMIRL	Let's meet in real life
FWB	Friends with benefits
ASL	Age, sex, location

By being familiar with the meaning of these abbreviations as well as being knowledgeable about grooming provide positive steps to keeping young people safe online (including mobile phones). Communication is one of the best ways of keeping young people safe online, talk regularly about what they are doing online, remind them of the dangers but creating an open relationship that they can share their online concerns with you.

Further advice and support can be obtained from FosterTalk social work support line or legal advice line on: **01527 836910**.