

# Understanding Grooming

## OUR POSITION:

**Bravehearts believes that understanding grooming is critical to the prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation, effective intervention and support, and in legal and justice processes. There are key areas that need further focus.**

- **Research on sexual abuse grooming has grown significantly over the past few decades, however several important gaps and limitations remain.**
- **Increasing awareness and education on grooming is essential because grooming is often subtle, manipulative, and misunderstood, making it difficult to recognise and prevent.**
- **There are legislative and legal process challenges in addressing grooming offences**
- **There is a growing opportunity to consider the integration of AI tools to detect grooming behaviours online**

## Background

"You know, I was 16, and I had an older man telling me he loved me...

"We'd been together on and off since I was 10 and I still didn't understand that it was that wrong.

"I knew it was a secret, but I didn't understand how wrong it was."

(Odette Visser, "After almost 30 years, these women are finally seeing justice for the abuse they suffered as children" Retrieved June 5, 2025: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-23/rock-climbing-instructor-stephen-mitchell-sentenced/102330834>)

It is important to understand that sexual abuse doesn't begin with violence. It often begins with grooming: a manipulative process where abusers build trust with a child or young person, primary caregivers or organisations, before abuse occurs. This reality makes early education, vigilance, and open conversation critical.

## What is Grooming

Grooming has been defined as: "The deceptive process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection. Prior to the commission of the sexual abuse, the would-be sexual abuser may select a victim, gain access to and isolate the minor, develop trust with the minor and often their guardians, community, and youth-serving institutions, and desensitise the minor to sexual content and physical contact. Post-abuse, the offender may use maintenance strategies on the victim to facilitate future sexual abuse and/or to prevent disclosure." (Winters, Kaylor & Jeglic, 2022, p. 933)

Grooming includes a range of behaviours and/or verbal or written communications, with the child or young person, or with significant adults, with the intention of facilitating sexual contact with the child or young person and preventing disclosure.

The Sexual Grooming Model (Winters, Jeglic & Kaylor, 2020) suggests that grooming involves five stages:

- 1) Selecting a vulnerable child to target for the abuse;
- 2) Gaining access and isolating the child from others;

- 3) Deceptively developing trust with the child and those around the child;
- 4) Gradually desensitising the child to sexual content and physical touch; and
- 5) After the abuse occurs, using post-abuse maintenance behaviours to facilitate the likelihood of continued abuse and/or reduce the likelihood of detection and disclosure.

Grooming may take several forms, for example:

- Building the child's trust: Using presents, special attention, treats, spending time together and playing games with non-sexual physical contact.
- Favouritism: The offender treats the child as an adult; treating them differently and making them feel like a unique friend, making the child feel more special than others.
- Gaining the trust of the child's parents or carer/s or an organisation: Careful to be 'seen' as a close, caring and reliable to disable the protective environment around the child.
- Isolation (from family, friends): To ensure secrecy and lessen chances of disclosure or belief.
- Intimidation and secrecy: The offender may use coercion e.g., threatening looks and body language, glares, stalking and rules of secrecy.
- 'Testing the waters' or boundary violation: 'Innocent' touching, gradually developing into 'accidental' sexual contact.
- Shaping the child's perceptions: The child is often confused as to what is acceptable and can take on self-blame for the situation, as his/her viewpoint can become totally distorted.

#### Detecting grooming

Sexual abuse grooming is hard to identify because it often involves subtle, manipulative behaviours designed to gain a victim's trust and desensitise them to inappropriate conduct, before the actual abuse occurs. Here are the main reasons it can be so difficult to spot:

1. It Appears Innocent at First: Groomers often start with seemingly kind or supportive behaviour (like giving attention, gifts, or mentorship) which can be mistaken for genuine care. This makes it harder for outsiders (and even the victim) to see it as predatory.
2. It Happens Gradually: Grooming is typically a slow process, often taking weeks, months, or even years. The gradual nature means the boundary-crossing behaviour increases incrementally, making it harder to recognise when things start to go wrong.
3. It Exploits Trust and Authority: Abusers often hold positions of trust (teachers, coaches, religious leaders, family members), making their intentions less likely to be questioned. Their status can make disclosures by victims harder to believe.
4. Victims Often Don't Realise It's Happening: Especially in cases involving children or adolescents, the victim may be confused about the relationship. The emotional manipulation can make them feel special, complicit, or even responsible, preventing them from understanding or reporting the abuse.
5. Groomers Often Manipulate the Environment: They may try to isolate the victim, discredit them to others, or charm people around them to avoid suspicion. This creates a protective bubble around the abuser and discourages intervention.

6. Fear, Shame, and Threats: Victims might stay silent due to shame, fear of not being believed, or direct threats from the abuser. Groomers often exploit these emotions to maintain control.
7. Social and Cultural Blind Spots: People may dismiss or overlook warning signs due to cultural attitudes, gender biases, or misconceptions about what abuse "looks like".

### Prevalence of grooming

Because grooming is difficult to detect, understanding the extent of the role of grooming in the perpetration of child sexual abuse can be difficult to determine. However, grooming is a very common and often central component of child sexual abuse perpetration. Research and expert consensus suggest that in a significant portion of cases grooming plays a critical role in enabling and sustaining the abuse, especially those involving ongoing abuse or abuse by someone known to the child:

- Amongst research with survivors of sexual abuse, 99% reported being subjected to at least one grooming behaviour (Winters et.al., 2024)
- Amongst survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, 100% reported grooming behaviours (Winters, Jeglic & Kaylor, 2024)
- Amongst survivors of sibling sexual abuse, research found that 100% reported being groomed (Winters & Jeglic, 2023).
- Amongst survivors of harmful sexual behaviours perpetrated by a young person, 97% reported being subjected to at least one grooming behaviour (Jeglic, Winters & Steedman, 2024)
- Amongst survivors of educator-perpetrated sexual abuse, 100% of adult survivors reported grooming behaviours (Jeglic & Winters, 2025)

### Online grooming

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in incidents of online grooming and the sexual and financial exploitation of children, with reports indicating an 82% rise in online grooming offenses against minors during this time (Third et.al., 2024). Additionally, the methods of online grooming have evolved, with the most rapidly expanding type of online grooming now focusing on young men for the purpose of financial extortion (Third et.al., 2024).

## **The Impact of Grooming**

Grooming is a process through which an individual builds a relationship, trust, and emotional connection with a child or young person to manipulate, exploit, and abuse them. The impact of grooming on children is multifaceted, affecting their psychological, emotional, social, and sometimes physical well-being.

### Psychological and emotional impact

Children who are victims of grooming often suffer from a range of psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and self-blame. The manipulative nature of grooming can distort a child's understanding of relationships, trust, and boundaries. Victims may experience intense confusion, especially when the abuser has gained their affection or posed as a caregiver.

### Cognitive and developmental disruptions

Grooming can interfere with a child's cognitive and emotional development. Children may struggle with concentration, academic performance, and identity formation. The betrayal of trust by a trusted adult figure may lead to long-term difficulties in forming healthy interpersonal relationships.

### Social and behavioural consequences

Children who have been groomed may exhibit behavioural changes such as withdrawal from social interactions, aggression, or sexualized behaviour inappropriate for their age. Stigma and fear of not being believed can result in isolation and reluctance to seek help. These outcomes are often compounded by societal misunderstanding or victim-blaming attitudes.

### Long-term effects

The effects of grooming can persist into adulthood. Adult survivors may suffer from chronic mental health conditions, difficulties with intimacy, substance misuse, and problems with employment or education. Trust issues and unresolved trauma are common, particularly if the grooming was accompanied by sexual abuse or exploitation.

### **Protective and intervention considerations**

Recognising sexual grooming can prove to be difficult, as many grooming behaviours closely resemble standard adult-child interactions (Jeglic, Winters & Johnson, 2023). However, there are typical behavioural patterns exhibited by offenders that may aid in identifying when a child is at risk of being groomed. While the existence of red flags does not definitively mean that a child is being groomed, understanding these 'red flag' behaviours can assist parents, guardians, and organisations in interrupting and possibly preventing the grooming process.

Early intervention, trauma-informed care, and ongoing support are critical in mitigating the long-term effects of grooming. Prevention strategies, including education about grooming tactics, digital safety, and open communication within families and institutions, are essential for safeguarding children.

### **Bravehearts Position**

Bravehearts believes that understanding grooming is critical to the prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation, effective intervention and support, and in legal and justice processes. There are key areas that need further focus.

- Research on sexual abuse grooming has grown significantly over the past few decades, especially with increasing awareness of child sexual abuse, institutional abuse, and online exploitation. However, several important gaps and limitations remain. These may include:
  - Online grooming is often treated as a distinct phenomenon, but comparative studies between online and offline grooming are rare.
  - The evolution of digital platforms (social media, gaming apps, encrypted messaging) outpaces research, leaving gaps in how grooming strategies change in digital spaces.

- There's an underrepresentation amongst some groups, for example research on grooming involving: boys and male-identifying victims, LGBTQ+ youth, First Nations, and minority ethnic or cultural groups
- There is limited empirical work on the diversity of grooming tactics and motivations across offender types.
- Increasing awareness and education on grooming is essential because grooming is often subtle, manipulative, and misunderstood, making it difficult to recognise and prevent. Misconceptions (e.g., that grooming always involves strangers or happens quickly) may delay intervention and allow abuse to continue unnoticed. Understanding red flags and grooming behaviours can interrupt the grooming process before abuse escalates, making it a powerful preventive tool. Some of the benefits of grooming awareness and education include
  - Adults who are educated about grooming are better prepared to identify red flags and take protective action.
  - Education about grooming behaviours (like love-bombing, secrecy, and manipulation) can reduce vulnerability to predators.
  - Training helps ensure timely, informed responses and reduces secondary harm (e.g., victim-blaming or disbelief).
  - Awareness shifts the culture from shame and silence to protection and accountability.
- There are legislative and legal process challenges in addressing grooming offences. Grooming is hard to prosecute without physical abuse; research on how grooming is interpreted in legal systems is still emerging. There's a need for empirical analysis of grooming evidence in court cases, especially across jurisdictions, that can lead to more effective legislative responses.
- There is a growing opportunity to consider the integration of AI tools to detect grooming behaviours online.

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