

Boundary Violations, “Grooming” and Child Sexual Abuse

Information for parents about keeping kids safe from sexual predators

You’re a thief—a con artist. You recently met an elderly widow with a good-sized bank account fueled by pension and dividend checks. In sharp contrast, your own financial engine is running on fumes. You decide to take her money.

So you befriend the lady. You run small errands for her. You buy her gifts. You listen to her stories and you comfort her when she feels lonely. You put your arm around her and tell her you understand her problems. You spend time with her each day. You tell her she’s special. You gain her trust. Her natural suspicion disappears.

Only then does the conversation shift to money. You tell her about a tremendous investment opportunity. You offer her a chance to share in this special event. If she’s curious, you play on that curiosity. You answer her questions and downplay her fears.

And your work pays off. She trusts you. She signs the check.

Three minutes after her bank opens, you’re in the wind, cash in hand and ready to target your next victim.

But what if you’re a child molester—a predator? What if the object of your desire isn’t the widow’s bank account, but her six-year-old grandson? What steps will you take to get what you want?

Not much will change. A predator will identify and engage his victim. He’ll gain the child’s trust, break down his defenses, and manipulate him into performing or permitting the desired sex act. If necessary, the predator will gain access to the child by employing the same techniques with the child’s parent or adult caretaker.

The process is called grooming. It increases the predator's access to his victim and decreases the likelihood of discovery.

Anna C. Salter is a respected psychologist. She is an expert in the field of child sexual maltreatment, and she spells it out:

“The establishment (and eventual betrayal) of affection and trust occupies a central role in the child molester’s interactions with children....The grooming process often seems similar from offender to offender, largely because it takes little to discover that emotional seduction is the most effective way to manipulate children.”

These men are convicted child molesters. They, too, are experts in the field of child maltreatment, and they also spell it out:

“[P]arents are so naive—they’re worried about strangers and should be worried about their brother-in-law. They just don’t realize how devious we can be. I used to abuse children in the same room with their parents and they couldn’t see it or didn’t seem to know it was happening.”

“I was disabled and spent months grooming the parents, so they would tell their children to take me out and help me. No one thought that disabled people could be abusers.”

“[P]arents are partly to blame if they don’t tell their children about [sexual matters]—I used it to my advantage by teaching the child myself.”

“[P]arents shouldn’t be embarrassed to talk about things like this—it’s harder to abuse or trick a child who knows what you’re up to.”

Here's what the predators are up to.

Grooming is a process. It begins when the predator chooses a target area. He may visit places where children are likely to go: schools, shopping malls, playgrounds, parks, and the like. He may work or volunteer at businesses that cater to children. Other predators strike up relationships with adults who have children in the home—single-parent families make particularly good targets.

Victim selection and recruitment are next. There is no prototypical victim of child sexual abuse. Any child may be victimized. Not surprisingly, predators often target children with obvious vulnerabilities. A child who feels unloved and unpopular will soak up adult attention like a sponge. Children with family problems, who spend time alone and unsupervised, who lack confidence and self-esteem, and who are isolated from their peers are all likely targets.

Predators engage their victims in different ways. Many use a combination of forced teaming and charm. They may offer to play games, give rides, or buy treats and gifts as tokens of friendship. They may offer drugs or alcohol to older children or teenagers. And they almost always offer a sympathetic, understanding ear. *Your parents don't understand or respect you? I do. Other kids make fun of you? I know what that's like—it was the same way for me when I was your age. They don't trust you at home? Boy, I know what that's like—your parents never really want you to grow up. But I trust you. I respect you. I care for you more than anybody else. And I love you. I'm here for you.*

Successful predators find and fill voids in a child's life.

A predator will usually introduce secrecy at some point during the grooming process. Initially, secrecy binds the victim to the predator: “Here’s some candy. But don’t tell your friends because they’ll be jealous, and don’t tell your mother because she won’t like you

eating between meals.” Later on, secrecy joins hands with threats: “If you tell your mother what happened, she’ll hate you. It’ll kill her. Or I’ll kill her. Or I’ll kill you.”

The forging of an emotional bond through grooming leads to physical contact. Predators use the grooming process to break down a child’s defenses and increase the child’s acceptance of touch. The first physical contact between predator and victim is often nonsexual touching designed to identify limits: an “accidental” touch, an arm around the shoulder, a brushing of hair. Nonsexual touching desensitizes the child. It breaks down inhibitions and leads to more overt sexual touching—the predator’s ultimate goal.

The best way to recognize grooming behavior is to pay attention to your child and the people in your child’s life. Gavin de Becker sensibly reminds us that “[c]hildren require the protection of adults, usually from adults. Their fear of people is not yet developed, their intuition not yet loaded with enough information and experience to keep them from harm.” There are many demands placed upon our time, but nothing—nothing—is more important than the welfare of our children. When we blindly surrender responsibility for them to others without question, we invite trouble. Parents should know their child’s teachers, coaches, day care providers, youth group leaders, and other significant adults in their lives. Make unannounced visits. Ask questions. Stay involved.

And please—talk to your children. Teach them to recognize grooming behavior. Teach them to be wary of any physical contact initiated by an adult. And teach them to trust you with their problems and their pain. The safest child is the child who knows he can bring his problems and concerns to parents and adult caregivers without reproach or retaliation.

By Gregory M. Weber