



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

WHAT IS GROOMING?

Grooming is what experts call the intentional actions and behaviors sexual predators use to try to gain access to children they want to molest or sexually abuse. People often think predators pick their child victims at random, or that we only need to focus on "stranger danger." But most child sexual abusers know and have some sort of relationship with their victims. Predators often try to groom children, adults, and even whole communities so they can:

- Gain access to children they abuse.
- Hide their actions.
- Decrease the risk they will be found out and stopped.

This fact sheet is designed to help you learn to recognize some common tactics that child sexual predators use to groom and manipulate children, adults, families, and communities.

PREDATORY CHILD GROOMING STRATEGIES

Predators groom children to gain their trust and create situations and opportunities to abuse them. While grooming takes many forms, predators often follow a five-step process to groom children for sexual abuse:

1. Identifying vulnerable children.
2. Engaging in peer-like involvement.
3. Desensitizing the child to touch.
4. Isolating the child emotionally and physically.
5. Making the child feel responsible for the abuse.

Though most predators start with the first step (identifying vulnerable children), it's important to know that from there, many predators take two or more of the steps at a time, take them out of order, or skip some completely. Some predators do little or no grooming at all before starting to touch or abuse their child victims.

Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets we have chosen to use the inclusive words *they*, *their*, and *them* as singular, nongendered pronouns.

We know that families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A family may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. Parents may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words *family* and *parent* in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.





Identifying Vulnerable Children

Predators seek out potential victims by looking for children they think are vulnerable, easy targets, or less likely to report abuse (Arévalo, et al., 2014; van Dam, 2001). More specifically, predators look for children who:

- Are looking for attention.
- Need someone to listen to them.
- Lack confidence or have low self-esteem.
- Struggle socially.
- Have a hard time maintaining appropriate boundaries.
- Have challenging family situations (such as high levels of conflict or economic stressors).
- Are likely to try to please adults.

Children with disabilities, especially children who struggle with verbal communication, may be at particular risk because it can be hard for them to communicate what is being done to them or to report abuse.

Why is this predatory behavior hard to recognize?

This first stage can be challenging for parents and other caregivers to recognize because it is hard to think of ourselves, our families, and our children as potentially vulnerable. The harsh reality is that we and the young people we care about are at risk.

Engaging in Peer-Like Involvement

Predators try to gain children's trust by talking, playing, and interacting with them as if they were peers and friends (Arévalo, et al., 2014; van Dam, 2001). They engage in activities children enjoy such as playing online games that are geared to younger audiences so they can easily interact with children.

Engaging with and connecting to children through their interests is not a bad thing by itself and isn't always an indication that someone is trying to harm a child. Predators who engage in peer-like involvement may:

- Struggle to set and maintain appropriate boundaries with children. They may offer children alcohol or drugs and share inappropriate personal information with children, including information about sex.
- Develop hobbies or interests that are appealing to children. Predators may intentionally find interests popular with children as a way to connect with them. They may have toys, games, or other things that interest children to entice kids to hang out with them or visit their home.
- Be way more interested in children than in adults. There is nothing wrong with adults enjoying playing with children and wishing to be around them. The troubling difference is that predators may not show much or any interest in engaging with adults. They may instead show sustained or exclusive interest in playing or hanging out with children.
- Have trouble stepping into an adult role with children when needed. Predators trying to act as peers to children may have trouble switching to an adult role when it's called for, such as when they need to redirect children's attention or behavior, keep everyone safe, and ensure that play is age-appropriate. For example, it's normal for an adult playing basketball with children to make jokes and have fun with the kids. But if someone gets hurt, or a player lashes out in frustration, the adult needs to be the adult and manage the situation. Predators have trouble doing that.

Why is this predatory behavior hard to recognize?





Having someone show an interest in and want to engage with a child can be nice and reassuring. Parents often find it helpful to have someone else who can share caretaking responsibilities, mentor a child, or keep them happy and entertained. It can be hard to look past the immediate benefits to the child and to you to question someone's motives.

Desensitizing the Child to Touch

The next step in the process of grooming a child is desensitizing the child to touch (Arévalo, et al., 2014; van Dam, 2001). Predators begin to touch the targeted child to test whether they will tell a parent or another adult about it. If the child does not report the touching, predators will often slowly increase the frequency or intensity of the touches until they actually begin abusing the child. In trying to desensitize a child to touch, predators may:

- Make frequent touching seem normal, starting with small, seemingly innocent touches (such as tickling or roughhousing). They may also frequently pick up or find other ways to touch the targeted child.
- Start with small touches to test whether the targeted child will report the activity. If the child does report the small touches to a parent or other adult they are easily explained away. (*"I was just helping him button up his pants after he used the bathroom."*) If the child does not report the small touches, the predator may be emboldened to continue and escalate the physical touching to abuse.
- Find other ways to desensitize the targeted child, such as by asking questions like: "Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?" "Have you kissed them yet?" "Are you sexually active?" They may pose these questions under the guise of being an involved, concerned, and helpful adult in the child's life (*"I just want to make sure you are being safe"*).

Why is this predatory behavior hard to recognize?

The process of desensitization often happens very slowly. The predator may begin the process with touching that the child wants and enjoys (such as tickling or roughhousing) and that seems so innocent that a parent or other adult seeing it lowers their guard. Eventually, some predators even find ways to touch the targeted child inappropriately in front of the child's parent without being noticed.

Isolating the Child Emotionally & Physically

Once a predator has gained the targeted child's trust and begun the desensitizing process, they will try to isolate the child physically and emotionally (Arévalo, et al., 2014; van Dam, 2001). This isolation allows the predator to get close to and potentially abuse the child. At this stage, the predator may:

- Use secrets to manipulate children into not telling adults about uncomfortable situations. They may tell a child that what happened or is happening is a secret that should stay just between the two of them. Because children often want to please adults, they may try to keep secrets, even if they are uncomfortable, if a predator asks them to.
- Become a seemingly reliable source of practical support to the targeted child. This can be material support (such as money, gifts, or rides) or emotional support (such as listening to the child talk about their problems and helping them work through the issues).
- Exaggerate family problems. A predator may try to emphasize or overplay problems the targeted child is having with their family as a way to emotionally isolate the child from the family. The predator may tell the child that their family doesn't care for them, won't be there for them, or won't provide for their needs.
- Physically isolate the child. A predator may look for opportunities to spend uninterrupted time alone with the targeted child (such as by taking the child to the movies or on a camping trip).





Why is this predatory behavior hard to recognize?

This behavior may be missed because the child is alone with the predator and no other adults are around to actually witness any inappropriate activity. The predator may also be working to create emotional distance between the child and their parent or other caregiver. The predator wants to make the targeted child reluctant to talk to any trusted adult about what is happening or about their own or the adult's concerns.

Making the Child Feel Responsible for the Abuse

Predators work to make the targeted child feel responsible for the abuse so the child is less likely to report what is going on (Arévalo, et al., 2014; van Dam, 2001). Predators use tactics such as making the child feel like they asked for the abuse, like they wanted it, or like they tempted the adult. They may try to convince the child that if they did not physically or verbally fight back they consented to the abuse or they secretly wanted it. Predators will work hard to manipulate the child into believing they deserved or asked for the abuse.

Why is this predatory behavior hard to recognize?

Predators often try to manipulate child victims into feeling somehow responsible for the abuse so they won't tell a parent or other trusted adult about it. Predators may even claim that a child's involuntary physical reaction (such as an erection) means the child wanted and consented to the abuse.

EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, be actively involved, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in protecting your child and helping them build the skills that will help them stay safe as they get older.

This doesn't mean that you have to prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It's a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. There are a lot of things you can do to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living fully and enjoying the world around you.

REFERENCES

Arévalo, E., Chavira, D., Cooper, B., & Smith, M. (2014). *SAFE (Screening applicants for effectiveness): Guidelines to prevent child molestation in mentoring and youth-serving organizations*. Friends for Youth Inc.

van Dam, C., (2001). *Identifying child molesters: Preventing child sexual abuse by recognizing the patterns of the offenders*. Routledge.





FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other MSU Extension resources:

- **Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines, as well as from evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts and afterschool programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3jG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; sharing about kids on social media; and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently seven titles in the series:
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan*. <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2011). *Preventing and identifying child sexual abuse—Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics*. <https://bit.ly/3iENpyB>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2019). *Media and children communication toolkit*. <https://bit.ly/3iDaGku>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources*. <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>

Acknowledgments

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