



Child Grooming Signs To Watch Out For | A Parents Guide

It's every parent's worst fear: *An online predator befriending their child, feigning similar interests and eventually establishing trust.*

This is a process known as child grooming, and it is used by paedophiles in preparing children for sexual abuse, and it can occur both online and offline. [7]

The Internet has redefined child grooming by removing physical boundaries and providing predators with a disguise of anonymity; making the concept of stranger danger infinitely more complex.

“The online world creates a real opportunity for offenders because it allows offenders to have that one-to-one relationship.” Dr Zoe Hilton, Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre.

Yet, despite all of its complexities, child grooming can be a deceptively simple and sophisticated process, and it is made all the more pervasive through the prevalence of Internet-capable devices. In fact, the growing use of smartphones has been identified by Australian Federal Police as a key factor in a recent increase in

instances of children as young as 4-years-of-age posting explicit images of themselves online [12].

So how can parents protect their children from the world's most dangerous and depraved Internet-users?

Firstly, by being informed. It's important for a parent's actions to be governed by knowledge, not by fear. Through being properly educated about child grooming signs and statistics, parents can feel empowered to proactively protect their children.



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Key Statistics On Child Grooming

- Victims of online grooming are most frequently aged between 13 and 17 [2]
- Online grooming usually takes place while the victim is at home using a computer or mobile device [3]
- While there's some conflicting research about who is most at risk, young girls are more frequent victims of online grooming [5]
- The following minority groups are especially vulnerable to grooming: Young males who are gay or questioning their sexual orientation, children with a history of sexual or physical abuse, and young people with poor relationships with their parents [2]
- The majority of online predators are male [3]
- A survey revealed that the majority of online grooming victims met the offender face-to-face; and 93% of those encounters resulted in illegal sexual contact [2]

- Teenagers will often engage with predators willingly; they find it exciting and special to have an older 'friend' that makes them feel desirable and validated during a time of maturation [5]

Child Grooming Signs To Watch Out For

"I just thought she was being a typical teenager." – Mother of online grooming victim.

Online child grooming can be hard for parents to recognise because grooming can happen gradually, over a long period of time, and while children are at home.

Groomers will also often warn children not to tell anyone about the relationship.

One of the best ways to keep your child safe online is to take an active interest in their online activities. You can do this by eliciting information from them and regularly monitoring their device. There are also a number of child grooming signs that parents should watch out for. Some of these signs can constitute 'normal' adolescent behaviour, but parents should pay special attention to their specific child and look out for increased instances of the following behaviours:

- They're unusually protective of their phone, computer, or mobile devices
- They're using sexual language that you wouldn't expect them to know
- They're using electronic devices that you didn't buy for them
- They've become notably more withdrawn and secretive
- They're receiving mail, toys, or gifts from unknown people
- There's pornography on their device
- They're emotionally volatile or withdrawn
- They seem nervous and on-edge when they receive a notification or phone call
- They lie to you about where they've been or who they've been talking to
- They start using someone else's online profile

Remember, a child who has been targeted by an online groomer may not necessarily show signs of being distressed or upset by the contact. Groomers are

adept at making their victims trust them, and a child may come to regard the offender as the ‘only person who truly understands them’.

Alicia Kozakiewicz was only 13-years-old when she was groomed, kidnapped, raped, and abused by an online predator. Alicia has since dedicated her life to raising awareness about child sexual exploitation, and warns parents that “online grooming is very effective” [9].

“They make your parents look like they are terrible, and your friends look like they are not your friends – because he’s always the one making you feel good about yourself.” [10]



ONLINE GROOMING:
What Parents Need To Know About
Grooming & Online Predators

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Predatory Signs To Watch Out For

The sexual exploitation of children is widely considered to be the most monstrous crime imaginable. The offence is so vile that it’s all-too-easy to assume that the offenders will appear visibly repulsive. Yet, unfortunately, this is not always true. It’s critical that we break this stereotype because sexual predators can be – and often are – people that we know; they can even be people who we’ve invited into our homes.

“Parents 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.”

– *Convicted child sex offender [1]*

It’s important that parents never assume someone is trustworthy simply because they work with children and ‘seem nice’. In fact, sexual predators often go to great lengths to place themselves in situations where they will be around children; they may work directly with children, volunteer at child friendly spaces, or coach a sports team. A former FBI agent warns parents that “paedophiles span the full spectrum from saints to monsters. In spite of this fact, over and over again paedophiles are not recognized, investigated, charged, convicted, or sent to prison simply because they are “nice guys”.” [1]

Just as there’s no ‘typical victim’, there’s no ‘typical predator’. However, there are certain behaviours that parents should watch out for. Of course, not all of these behaviours are inherently inappropriate, but when combined they can raise a few red-flags:

- They pay special attention to a child
- They involve a child in fun activities that may entail them being alone together
- They position themselves as sympathetic listeners
- They touch your child (in an appropriate manner) in your presence; creating the impression that you’re aware of and comfortable with them touching your child
- They tell risqué jokes to children in an attempt to trigger the child’s innate sexual curiosity
- They buy treats or toys for young children

These behaviours can apply in offline environments as well as online. Child sex offenders who target children offline tend to personally know the victim, and they may therefore attempt to groom the victim's parents as well.

“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.”

– Convicted child sex offender [1]

In some instances, a predator may begin their interactions offline and then take the interaction online in an attempt to establish a one-to-one relationship with a child outside of the view of other adults. Some predators, however, will act exclusively through the Internet, frequenting chat rooms, social networks, or online games. Here is a list of common tactics used by online predators:

- Giving compliments
- Offering gifts
- Eliciting information and establishing mutual interests
- Adding a child's friends to their social network
- Engaging in increasingly personal or sexualised conversation
- Seeking offline contact
- Expressing an interest in meeting face-to-face

How To Prevent Child Grooming

It may seem extreme or perhaps even counter-intuitive to talk to young children about things such as online grooming, but it could actually be one of the most effective ways to prevent them from being targeted.

“Parents 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.” – Convicted child sex offender [1]

In fact, in response to the growing threat of online grooming, Australian Federal Police will be conducting cyber safety training for children as young as 4-year-old [11]. While this training is already available to children in grades 3 and upwards under the ThinkUKnow program, the AFP plan to start teaching online safety to kindergarteners after it has “emerged (that) kids as young as four have posted explicit images of themselves and been groomed by sex predators on the web” [12].



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The training is intended to make children, parents, and teachers better equipped to avoid cyber threats such as: online grooming, cyberbullying, sexting, and identity theft.

If you have reason to suspect that your child has been targeted by an online groomer, here's what you should do next:

- Gather evidence (screenshots of usernames, messages, photos, etc)
- Talk to your child, but try to avoid being accusatory
- Report the user on the applicable website, app, game, or network and then block them
- Contact the police – even if the grooming never escalated or your child never engaged the groomer
- Seek support for your child through the following channels:

Kids Helpline: [Support](#)

Bravehearts – Counselling and Support: Support is at hand

ThinkUKnow: Reporting to social media sites

Australian Federal Police: Report online child protection form

If you believe your or any child is in immediate danger please phone 000.

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