



Perpetrators and grooming

Content warning:

This material contains information that may be distressing for readers.

This resource focuses on the sexual abuse of children by adults.¹ When we talk about a *child*, we mean a person aged **under 18 years**. We recognise and acknowledge the diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and genders of children.

Who sexually abuses children?

Some people still believe that children were only sexually abused in the past, in institutions like orphanages, or by religious leaders or strangers. But we know that child sexual abuse has not stopped and continues at alarming levels today. Children are often sexually abused by someone they know and trust, often within the context of family relationships and systems.

Those who sexually abuse children (perpetrators) come from all walks of life.² They include parents, family members, family friends, community leaders, and those who work or volunteer in all types of organisations.^{3,4,5} They may hold well-paying jobs and be considered respected members of community. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse are most often men.

The power structures and dynamics that exist within society and family relationships contribute to and enable child sexual abuse to occur. Children inherently have less choice and control over themselves, their surroundings, and adults. Children are discouraged from questioning adults often under their authority,

supervision or care up to the age of 18. When they do raise concerns, they are often ignored, minimised or not believed.⁶ An adult's version of events is more likely to be believed over a child's. These power dynamics exist globally and put children at risk and perpetrators exploit this to sexually abuse children.

What is grooming?

Grooming involves **intentional** and **deliberate** acts or behaviours to manipulate a child, cause harm and keep children silent.

Child sexual abuse often occurs after or alongside grooming, and frequently continues after child sexual abuse has commenced.⁷

Grooming tactics often involve gradual exposure to increasingly inappropriate and abusive behaviour that is hidden from adults. This can make it difficult for adults to identify when a child is being groomed, and often the child will blame themselves for the abuse.

It is important to note that grooming is based on *intent* or *motivation* to abuse, not whether sexual abuse occurs.



How are children groomed?

There are five main stages in the grooming process although they do not all have to be present or occur in this order. It can sometimes be challenging to recognise behaviours as part of a grooming process particularly in the early stages as the behaviours are not obviously sexual.

Perpetrators can also sexually abuse a child without grooming a child first.

1

Step 1: A child is targeted

While all children are at risk of being sexually abused, some children are at higher risk of being deliberately targeted by perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

These children may:

-
- Step 1:**
A child is **targeted**
 - Step 2:**
Trust is built
 - Step 3:**
The child is **isolated**
 - Step 4:**
The child is **desensitised** and **sexualised**
 - Step 5:**
The child is **controlled**
-

- be more compliant
- trust and obey adults
- have low self-esteem and confidence
- feel lonely or isolated
- be socially isolated, have poor social skills or are being bullied by peers
- be perceived as 'troubled'
- feel unwanted or unloved
- have fractured relationships with their parents
- not have a 'father figure'
- not be supervised appropriately
- have previously experienced maltreatment, including neglect, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and family violence
- be experiencing financial strain, either personally or within their families
- have parents or caregivers with a disability or significant health condition
- have experienced the death of a parent
- be part of a socially, economically, racially or culturally group that has been marginalised
- have diverse gender and sexuality identities
- have a disability, particularly where there is reliance on an adult to assist with personal care or there are communication challenges
- have unstable living arrangements, such as being homeless or living in residential care.^{8, 9, 10, 11, 12}

These are risk factors only, and not all children with these characteristics will be groomed or become victims of sexual abuse.





2

Step 2: Trust is built

Perpetrators build a sense of trust with the child, and often with the family and other adults who would normally be a source of safety.

Perpetrators may:

-
- 1 **Step 1:**
A child is **targeted**
 - 2 **Step 2:**
Trust is built
 - 3 **Step 3:**
The child is **isolated**
 - 4 **Step 4:**
The child is **desensitised** and **sexualised**
 - 5 **Step 5:**
The child is **controlled**
-

- offer to provide help and care to parents or caregivers
- use attention, gifts, favouritism and affection to become closer to the child
- provide emotional support, mentoring or training to a child experiencing interpersonal challenges or lack of adult involvement
- spend time with the child doing activities such as gaming, communicating on social media or playing sport with the child
- make the child feel that they hold a 'special status'
- pretend to be a child or young person to trick the child into chatting with them online
- provide children with money, gifts, alcohol or drugs to gain access and build rapport and trust.^{13,14,15,16,17,18}

Perpetrators often present as trustworthy, reputable, generous, and likeable.¹⁹ In some situations, whole families or organisations have been groomed, leading to a sense of shock and surprise when their perpetration of child sexual abuse is uncovered.

3

Step 3: The child is isolated

Perpetrators find ways to be alone with a child, whether that be online, in person or both. They might deliberately seek or make use of employment or volunteering in organisations for children, such as schools, sporting and recreational clubs, classes or youth groups, or get involved in activities where adult supervision is limited, such as overnight camps or one-on-one music lessons. They may manipulate parents and carers to gain access, such as offering to babysit or tutor.^{20, 21, 22} Perpetrators often use online technology, such as social media and chat platforms, to further isolate the child from their family and friends and convince the child to keep their contact secret.²³

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-

4

Step 4: The child is desensitised and sexualised

Perpetrators gradually incorporate increasingly overfamiliar and inappropriate interactions, breaching normally accepted boundaries that eventually lead to sexual conversations and touch. They may tell the child sexual jokes, ask about their sexual experience, or tell a child about their own, or talk about sex under the guise of providing sexual education.²⁴

Perpetrators exploit the relationship and false intimacy they have created with children. Their behaviour may escalate slowly or quickly. They may show the child pornography, convince the child to take and share 'nudes', or to undress in front of them.²⁵ Perpetrators may use non-sexual contact such as hugging, tickling, 'play' wrestling or massages,²⁶ 'accidentally' brush up against the child, or inappropriately touch the child in the context of helping with a task or activity.

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5

Step 5: The child is controlled

Perpetrators use secrecy, shame, blame and threats to maintain control to continue the abuse and ensure the child doesn't tell anyone else what has or is happening. The perpetrator may coerce or manipulate the child in many ways. They may pressure, extort, and threaten the child to keep secrets by using tricks, sophisticated persuasion, bribes or rewards or removal of favour. Perpetrators use the intimacy and trust they have established to manipulate the child into thinking and feeling that they are responsible or complicit in the abuse. They might tell or convince the child:²⁷

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-

- that no one will believe their story or their words
- that the behaviour was appropriate or that the child was misinterpreting the behaviour
- they are special, or that the child and perpetrator are in a 'relationship'
- they are to blame and should have said something earlier if they were uncomfortable
- that they will release sexualised content they have of the child (such as screenshots of conversations, photos, or videos)
- that if they tell, they will be rejected by or removed from their family, or that they will be responsible for the breaking up of their family
- that they will be responsible for damaging consequences to the perpetrator and their own future reputation.



Find out more

The National Centre has a range of resources designed to support you to understand and respond to child sexual abuse. You can access these at:

[Resources - The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse.](#)

If you need support, please contact:

Lifeline - 13 11 14

13YARN - 13 92 76

1800RESPECT
1800 737 732

Blue Knot Helpline and
Redress Support Service
1300 657 380

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800

- ¹ Children can also be sexually harmed by other children. This is often referred to as *harmful sexual behaviours*.
- ² [Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviour and attitudes among Australian men - Salter et al.](#)
- ³ [Child sexual abuse by different classes and types of perpetrator: Prevalence and trends from an Australian national survey - Child Abuse & Neglect, accessed April 2024](#)
- ⁴ [Misperceptions about child sex offenders - Australian Institute of Criminology \(AIC\), accessed March 2024](#)
- ⁵ [Who perpetrates child sexual abuse? - National Office for Child Safety \(NOCS\), accessed March 2024](#)
- ⁶ [Still unseen and ignored: Tracking community knowledge and attitudes about child abuse and child protection in Australia - Australian Childhood Foundation](#)
- ⁷ [Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ⁸ [Grooming and Red Flag Behaviors - Darkness to Light, accessed March 2024](#)
- ⁹ [Validation of the Sexual Grooming Model of Child Sexual Abusers - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ¹⁰ [Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse \(Royal Commission\)](#)
- ¹¹ [Child sexual abuse - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(AIHW\), accessed March 2024](#)
- ¹² [Risk factors for child sexual abuse victimization: A meta-analytic review - Psychological Bulletin](#)
- ¹³ [Grooming and Red Flag Behaviors - Darkness to Light, accessed March 2024](#)
- ¹⁴ [Grooming - NOCS, accessed March 2024](#)
- ¹⁵ [Nature of child sexual abuse: risk factors & dynamics | Bravehearts](#)
- ¹⁶ [Child grooming and unwanted contact - eSafety Commissioner, accessed March 2024](#)
- ¹⁷ [Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts - Royal Commission](#)
- ¹⁸ [Grooming - NOCS, accessed March 2024](#)
- ¹⁹ [Validation of the Sexual Grooming Model of Child Sexual Abusers - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
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- ²¹ [Grooming and Red Flag Behaviors - Darkness to Light, accessed March 2024](#)
- ²² [Validation of the Sexual Grooming Model of Child Sexual Abusers - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ²³ [Child grooming and unwanted contact - eSafety Commissioner, accessed March 2024](#)
- ²⁴ [Validation of the Sexual Grooming Model of Child Sexual Abusers - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ²⁵ [Child grooming and unwanted contact - eSafety Commissioner, accessed March 2024](#)
- ²⁶ [Validation of the Sexual Grooming Model of Child Sexual Abusers - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ²⁷ [Validation of the Sexual Grooming Model of Child Sexual Abusers - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)