

Child Sexual Abuse: 6 Stages of Grooming

By Dr. Michael Welner

Grooming is the process by which an offender draws a victim into a sexual relationship and maintains that relationship in secrecy.

The shrouding of the relationship is an essential feature of grooming. Forensic psychiatrist Dr. Michael Welner explains the six stages that can lead up to sexual molestation.

The grooming sex offender works to separate the victim from peers, typically by engendering in the child a sense that they are special to the child and giving a kind of love to the child that the child needs.

Different law enforcement officers and academics have proposed models of the "stages" of grooming. Since there are a variety of these models, it is best to think of the grooming by sex offenders as a gradual, calculated process that ensnares children into a world in which they are a willing part of the sex abuse.

Stage 1: Targeting the Victim

The offender targets a victim by sizing up the child's vulnerability—emotional neediness, isolation, and lower self-confidence. Children with less parental oversight are more desirable prey.

Stage 2: Gaining the Victim's Trust

The sex offender gains trust by watching and gathering information about the child, getting to know his needs and how to fill them. In this regard, sex offenders mix effortlessly with responsible caretakers because they generate warm and calibrated attention. Only more awkward and overly personal attention, or an uncomfortable intrusiveness, provokes the suspicion of parents. Otherwise, a more nuanced sex offender is better disciplined for how to push and poke, without revealing themselves. Think of the grooming sex offender on the prowl as akin to a spy— stealth.

Stage 3: Filling a Need

Once the sex offender begins to fill the child's needs, that adult may assume noticeably more importance in the child's life and may become idealized. Gifts, extra attention, affection may distinguish one adult and should raise concern and greater vigilance to be accountable for that adult

Stage 4: Isolating the Child

The grooming sex offender uses the developing special relationship with the child to create situations in which they are alone together. This isolation further reinforces a special connection. Babysitting, tutoring, coaching and special trips all enable this isolation.

A special relationship can be even more reinforced when an offender cultivates a sense in the child that he is loved or appreciated in a way that others, not even parents, provide. Parents may unwittingly feed into this through their own appreciation for the unique relationship.

Stage 5: Sexualizing the Relationship

At a stage of sufficient emotional dependence and trust, the offender progressively sexualizes the relationship. Desensitization occurs through talking, pictures, even creating situations (like going swimming) in which both offender and victim are naked. At that point, the adult exploits a child's natural curiosity, using feelings of stimulation to advance the sexuality of the relationship.

When teaching a child, the grooming sex offender can shape the child's sexual preferences and can manipulate what a child finds exciting and extend the relationship in this way. The child comes to see himself as a more sexual being and to define the relationship with the offender in more sexual and special terms.

Stage 6: Maintaining Control

Once the sex abuse is occurring, offenders commonly use secrecy and blame to maintain the child's continued participation and silence—particularly because the sexual activity may cause the child to withdraw from the relationship.

Children in these entangled relationships—and at this point they are entangled—confront threats to blame them, to end the relationship and to end the emotional and material needs they associate with the relationship, whether it be the dirt bikes the child gets to ride, the coaching one receives, special outings or other gifts. The child may feel that the loss of the relationship and the consequences of exposing it will humiliate and render them even more unwanted.