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Let's Talk

A Message from Our Site-Based Therapists



CHILD SEXUAL GROOMING: RED FLAGS AND HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD STAY SAFE

By CAC Site-Based Therapist Dr. Tiffany

According to the most current data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys in the US experience child sexual abuse. Most abuse (91%) is perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child and/or their family. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse often use grooming behaviors to disguise their behavior and discourage the child from telling a safe adult about the abuse. Researchers believe that while grooming can often be hard to identify, noticing the signs of grooming can help safe adults provide the help that children need.

Child sexual grooming has a variety of definitions in the research. Jeglic et al. (2023) defined grooming as “the process by which a person seeking to commit a sexual offense creates a situation in which the child sexual abuse can be more easily enacted and remain undetected.” The process generally includes five stages for the perpetrator: (1) selecting a vulnerable child to target; (2) gaining access to the child and isolating them from others; (3) developing trust with the child and those around

CHILD SEXUAL GROOMING

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them; (4) gradually getting the child used to sexual content and physical touch; and (5) after the abuse, using certain behaviors to discourage the child from telling a safe adult about the abuse. While protecting your child from “stranger danger” is still important and necessary, most child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child knows and has a relationship with. Grooming can be difficult to spot because the perpetrator’s interactions with the child may appear innocuous to other adults. One way you can prevent grooming is to be aware of potential red flags so that you can intervene to help keep your child safe. The following is a list of just a few potential red flags of grooming behaviors,

ranging from the lowest level of concern to the highest level of concern:

- A person does activities alone with your child.
- A person gives your child a lot of attention.
- A person communicates with your child often.
- A person tells your child they have a “special relationship” with them.
- A person gets close to your family to gain access to your child.
- A person uses inappropriate sexual language or tells dirty jokes around your child.
- A person tells your child about their past sexual experiences.
- A person separates or isolates your child from their peers and family.
- A person increases sexualized touching of the child over time.

As a caregiver of a child, there are additional steps you can take to help keep your child safe and prevent the risk of grooming and child sexual abuse. Here are a few recommendations:

- Talk to your child about secrets and surprises. Help your child understand that a surprise (like a birthday party) is safe because soon everyone will know about it, and everyone will feel happy. But secrets that are kept from others are not safe, and your child should always tell you if someone asks them to keep a secret from you. Let your child know they will never get in trouble for telling you about a secret someone else asked them to keep from you.
- Listen actively and have frequent communication with your child. Reflect back what you hear, ask clarifying questions, and make space each day to check in with your child. Try not to react with anger, frustration, or judgement to what your child shares with you. The more comfortable your child feels sharing hard things with you, the more likely they are to disclose inappropriate behavior from other adults in their life.
- Teach your child about consent and encourage your child to be assertive about their boundaries. Model consent by asking permission before you hug or kiss your child and respecting their choice. Help



your child learn to say “no” anytime they are uncomfortable. For example, allow your child to say “no” to hugs from family members if they do not want to be hugged; support their choice and ask family members to respect their boundaries. Work with your child on a plan for uncomfortable situations, like calling you for a ride or using you as an “excuse” to leave an uncomfortable situation without conflict.



- Be cautious about people who seem very charming. Ask yourself if you feel like this person is actively trying to charm you, your child, and/or other family members. Be cautious about adults who engage in physical interaction with your child (e.g. sitting too close, rubbing their shoulders, asking the child to sit in their lap, carrying your child). Be cautious about adults who act like peers of children and attempt to bond over childlike interests (e.g. videogames, toys).
- Be involved in your child’s interactions with others. Get to know everyone who interacts with your child, including family friends, teachers, coaches, daycare providers, faith leaders, etc. Don’t leave your child alone with someone unfamiliar. Consider researching new people online or speaking to others who know them well to learn about their history.
- Know where your child is and ask about what’s going on there. Ask questions about how your child likes school, how they interact with adults during the day, etc.
- Trust your gut feelings! If something just doesn’t feel right, trust your instincts. It’s okay to cancel an appointment or change plans for your child if you are worried they won’t be safe.

Child sexual grooming can also happen online via social media. For example, perpetrators may send sexually explicit content and/or encourage your child to have sexually explicit conversations, send sexual photos/videos, or meet up with them in person. Teen girls seem to be the most vulnerable, but any child using social media can become a target for grooming. Perpetrators of this type of grooming can be strangers, peers, or known adults. Perpetrators may present as themselves, or they may create a false identity to form a relationship with your child. Here are some tips for preventing and stopping online grooming:

- Talk with your child about online safety and privacy. Teach your child to keep their information private and be careful about what you and other family members post online about your child. For example, a cute “First Day of School” post that includes information about your child’s name, grade level, school, and teacher could give a potential groomer a significant amount of information about your child which could be used to form an inappropriate relationship.



- Create rules about your child’s access to social media, videogames, and the internet in general. Learn about exactly how they are interacting with others online (e.g., playing a videogame with strangers, messaging friends from school) and have open discussions about what types of communication are safe and unsafe. Depending on your child’s age, consider restricting access to social media and/or only allowing child-safe applications like Facebook’s Kids Messenger. Consider limiting

time on devices in private spaces like their bedroom and allowing use of devices in common areas of the home. Keep devices out of your child's bedroom at night as some research indicates a large portion of online grooming happens after 11pm.

- Encourage your child to come to you anytime they feel uncomfortable about something that happened online. Try not to get angry or upset with your child and focus on encouraging open conversations without punishment.

As a caregiver, you have the power to help keep your child safe and significantly decrease their risk of falling victim to child sexual grooming. Above all, having open and honest conversations with your child about boundaries and consent will help them to stay safe.

CDC - Fast Facts: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Statistics:
[cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html)



"Let's Talk" is brought to you by the Madison County Child Advocacy Center's Site-Based Therapists.

Cyndee and Tiffany are specially trained in speaking with individuals who have experienced trauma and are a resource for children and families who have utilized the Madison County Child Advocacy Center. To see past "Let's Talk" articles, please visit the Resource Tab on our website, madco-cac.org.



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