**What is ‘Grooming’**

Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of [sexual abuse](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse/), [sexual exploitation](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/) or [trafficking](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-trafficking/).

Children and young people can be groomed online or face-to-face, by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional.

Groomers may be male or female. They could be any age.

Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed or that what has happened is abuse.

**Signs of Grooming**

The signs of grooming aren't always obvious and groomers will often go to great lengths not to be identified.

If a child is being groomed they may:

* be very secretive, including about what they are doing online
* have older boyfriends or girlfriends
* go to unusual places to meet friends
* have new things such as clothes or mobile phones that they can't or won't explain
* have access to drugs and alcohol.

In older children, signs of grooming can easily be mistaken for 'normal' teenage behaviour, but you may notice unexplained changes in behaviour or personality, or [inappropriate sexual behaviour for their age](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/healthy-sexual-behaviour-children-young-people/).

**How grooming happens**

Grooming happens both online and in person. Groomers will hide their true intentions and may spend a long time gaining a child's trust. Groomers may try to gain the trust of a whole family to allow them to be left alone with a child and if they work with children they may use similar tactics with their colleagues.

Groomers do this by:

* pretending to be someone they are not, for example saying they are the same age online
* offering advice or understanding
* buying gifts
* giving the child attention
* using their professional position or reputation
* taking them on trips, outings or holidays.

They may also use:

**Secrets and intimidation to control children** Once they have established trust, groomers will exploit the relationship by isolating the child from friends or family and making the child feel dependent on them. They will use any means of power or control to make a child believe they have no choice but to do what they want. Groomers may introduce 'secrets' as a way to control or frighten the child. Sometimes they will blackmail the child, or make them feel ashamed or guilty, to stop them telling anyone about the abuse.

**Online social networks**. Groomers can use social media sites, instant messaging apps including teen dating apps, or online gaming platforms to connect with a young person or child. They can spend time learning about a young person’s interests from their online profiles and then use this knowledge to help them build up a relationship. It’s easy for groomers to hide their identity online - they may pretend to be a child and then chat and become ‘friends’ with children they are targeting.

**Groomers may look for:**

* usernames or comments that are flirtatious or have a sexual meaning
* public comments that suggest a child has low self-esteem or is vulnerable. Groomers don’t always target a particular child. Sometimes they will send messages to hundreds of young people and wait to see who responds. Groomers no longer need to meet children in real life to abuse them. Increasingly, groomers are sexually exploiting their victims by persuading them to take part in online sexual activity.

**Child sexual abuse online**

When [sexual exploitation](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/) happens online, young people may be persuaded, or forced, to:

* send or post sexually explicit images of themselves
* take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone
* have sexual conversations by text or online.

Abusers may threaten to send images, video or copies of conversations to the young person's friends and family unless they take part in other sexual activity.

Images or videos may continue to be shared long after the sexual abuse has stopped.

**How common is Grooming?**

We don't know how common grooming is because often children don't tell anyone what is happening to them.

Children may not speak out because they are:

* ashamed
* feeling guilty
* unaware that they're being abused
* believe they are in a relationship with a ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’.