

GROOMING

Sexual abuse does not just happen “out of the blue”. Most often a process of grooming is involved, which overcomes a person’s defenses by slowly desensitizing his or her natural reactions to abusive behaviors. Grooming works by mixing positive behaviors with elements of abuse. Abusive elements are added incrementally so as not to alarm the one targeted for abuse, and to normalize inappropriate behaviors. Grooming happens to both children and adults.

Stages of Grooming:

1. **Targeting:** The one initiating the grooming process, most often with intentions toward abuse, targets someone by assessing points of vulnerability such as emotional neediness, isolation and low self-confidence.
2. **Gaining trust:** This individual then gains trust by gathering information about the targeted person, getting to know his or her needs and how to fill them, and making him or her feel important and valued.
3. **Filling a need:** Over time, the individual assumes more importance and may become idealized as he or she begins meeting the needs of the targeted person.
4. **Isolation and Dependence:** A relationship of dependence is developed so that the one targeted begins to believe that he or she needs the help and support of the one initiating the grooming. The evolving special relationship creates situations of being alone together, which further reinforces a strong connection. This special relationship can be reinforced by manipulating the relationship, so that the targeted individual believes that he or she is loved or appreciated in a way that is not provided to them by others.
5. **Sexualizing the relationship:** At a stage of sufficient emotional dependence and trust, the one perpetrating the abuse gradually sexualizes the relationship by increasing sexual behaviors. The one victimized begins to interpret these behaviors as appropriate. For example, a therapist seeking to abuse a client may end each counseling session with a hug and gradually increase the intensity or duration of these interactions.
6. **Maintaining control:** Once abuse occurs, secrecy and blame are used to maintain participation and silence. The one victimized may feel that the loss of the relationship and the consequences of exposing it will be personally humiliating, or that the wellbeing of the one perpetrating the abuse depends on keeping silence. Spiritual and therapeutic rationalizations may also be used to support abusive behavior.

For most of the relationship, the person targeted for abuse may be eager to experience the sense of value and “specialness” gained from the relationship and want to be with the person grooming him or her. This can be very confusing, and contributes to later guilt and shame. Because of the staged and confusing progression, the one victimized may not understand that the abuse was intended from the beginning, and that the one perpetrating abuse had been the sole initiator. Either or both parties may adhere to a false belief that progression in the relationship was mutual. The grooming process is largely responsible for hesitancy to report abuse.