

Understanding Grooming

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Grooming has long been taught as a linear process that moves from targeting a child, to befriending them and creating a loving, trusting friendship before moving into a secret, intimate relationship which enables the sex offender to abuse the child. I will present challenges to that narrative in this factsheet. Instead, I will argue that grooming is often not linear and there is much more to learn about the experience of being groomed as a child. Professionals will gain insight from understanding the grooming process from the perspective of the child.

What Do We Mean When We Say 'Grooming'?

If you google the definition of 'grooming', Cambridge Dictionary offers this first:

The things that you do to make your appearance clean and neat, for example brushing your hair, or the things that you do to keep an animal's hair or fur clean and neat.

Then this second:

The criminal activity of becoming friends with a child, especially over the internet, in order to try to persuade the child to have a sexual relationship. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017)

However, Google (2017) offers an alternative definition:

Preparing or training someone for a particular purpose or activity.

The last definition is interesting because it most closely aligns with how neutral grooming can be, especially when not performed for sexual offences. Grooming is now known as a negative term – but what about this sentence?...

"The star pupils at the academy were often groomed for greater opportunities."

The word 'grooming' is used heavily in the press, in research, reports, practice and theory, and yet there is no one accepted definition of grooming. A quick search will return the results shown above, with most dictionaries listing 'grooming' as related to hygiene and appearance. Some dictionaries then offer a second definition that relates to sexual grooming.

The most interesting definition is the one from Google, which is arguably the most accurate when considering the many ways abusers use grooming techniques. 'Preparing or training someone for a particular purpose or activity' is a very objective and factual way of looking at grooming. It clearly shows that the power and authority is coming from one direction, and it could result in anything. This could be describing the way a sex offender carefully prepares a child for a sexual offence so that when it occurs, they do not disclose or resist or it could be describing something entirely different, like the quote that says, 'star pupils at the academy were often groomed for greater opportunities'.

You might even find the word 'grooming' or 'groomed' being used to talk about politics, football or fame. It is common to find articles describing up and coming politicians as 'being groomed to be the next Prime Minister' or young footballers 'being groomed to be the next striker for Chelsea'.

However, the current definitions are incorrect, incomplete or oversimplified. The definition of sexual grooming given by the Cambridge Dictionary specifically references children, despite the act of grooming being possible against any person. Second, it only references sexual abuse, but we have seen in cases all around the world that children and adults can be groomed to commit petty crime, to perform terrorist attacks, to traffic humans, to abuse others, to commit fraud and even to bully others online. Cases from Rotherham, Derby and Oxford included victims who were groomed not only for sexual abuse and exploitation, but also to commit crime.

Grooming is best understood as a complex and non-linear process used to coerce, manipulate or persuade someone to do something that is illegal or would harm them. This could be:

- ❖ A woman who groomed an old man for years through intimacy and affection to convince him to sign over his will to her
- ❖ A young man who is grooming children online by using propaganda and fake videos to radicalise them to commit acts of terror on behalf of a larger group
- ❖ Groups of adults who groom young boys to mug people in the street, telling them that they will be respected and allowed access to a gang that provides safety and friendship.

Grooming is not unique to sexual offences but is generally used in this arena.

Grooming In Sexual Offences

Let's have a look at what we mean when we say 'grooming' in sexual offences...

NSPCC

'Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or 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.'

This definition from the NSPCC accurately identifies that grooming can take place online or face to face, by a stranger or by someone they know, by males or females, people of any age and that children generally don't know or understand that they are being groomed. However, this definition relies on an emotional connection and a level of trust which conforms to the traditional stereotype of a sex offender who spends time carefully grooming children using affection and positive communication – and we know that many sex offenders do not do this.

ThinkUKnow

'Grooming is a process used by people with a sexual interest in children to prepare a child for sexual abuse. It is often very carefully planned, and it can take place over weeks, months or even years. Grooming is about making a child think that sex with the offender is normal or that they have no choice. Offenders do this by building a relationship and emotional connection with the child.'

This definition used by ThinkUKnow is considerably more specific and makes some assumptions that could be misleading. Grooming can take place over weeks, months and years, but with the invention of social media and apps, why would it? We now have more and more cases of grooming where it has taken less than a few hours. Of course, there are face to face grooming cases which also take less than a few hours too. Grooming doesn't have to be a lengthy process if the sex offender is very skilled. Grooming also doesn't need to be positive or careful if, for example, the child is groomed using coercion, threat and manipulation. This definition adds 'offenders do this by building a relationship' which is more objective and easier to use than 'an emotional connection' because a relationship could mean anything, including an absence of emotion, whilst still being manipulative enough to groom the child.

You&Co

'Grooming is a form of sexual abuse, and if you meet the person who is grooming you they may try to sexually assault you, which is when they touch you in a sexual way that you don't agree to. They might use secrecy, blame, gifts or threats of violence to stop you from telling somebody. This is because they know that if you tell someone what's happening, they will no longer have power or control over you.'

The You&Co definition is written for children, and it is good to see that the term 'sexual assault' is used clearly and accurately, including an explanation of what that means. This is the only definition that introduces the possibility of a negative grooming process where they use threats of violence and secrecy, power, and control.

What Do Children Understand About Grooming?

In August 2017, Jessica Taylor collected quotes from 20 children about what they understood about grooming. They were found to be highly similar in nature. Children either didn't know, related it to appearance, pets and hair or they were able to give a brief example of grooming of children. Most children (16 out of 20) did not know what grooming was. Out of 20 children, only 4 children gave answers that implied they had a basic awareness of grooming being about the process of deceiving a child to make them 'do stuff'. Of the four children who gave these answers, three of them were teenagers and one of them was 9 years old.

There is the possibility that older teenagers hold a higher level of knowledge about grooming because of the recent move to include it in education and awareness resources when they reach secondary school. However, it is rare to find education and awareness raising of that level or clarity in primary schools.

Children were asked:

- ❖ What does the word 'grooming' mean?
- ❖ If a person 'grooms' a child, what does that mean?

A selection of responses are below:

Nope. No idea. I have no idea what that word means – boy, aged 6

It means they dressed them up or something, I think – girl, aged 7

You mean like a dog? Like cutting dog hair? – girl, aged 8

Isn't it when people say stuff to kids to make them do what they want? Like, they say a load of stuff and make the kid do something? – boy, aged 9

No idea – girl, aged 10

It's when you do your hair isn't it? Oh hang on... you mean when someone tries to control you by being persuasive and stuff? – boy, aged 13

It's when adults pretend to be people to get to kids – boy, aged 15

When someone on the internet offers to buy you stuff and look after you and it's some creepy old bloke. They have been messaging them and making them feel protected, and women can do it too – girl, aged 15

What Can Children Teach Us About Grooming?

Grooming Through Charm and Affection

Quotes from real children who called Childline in 2012:

Getting attention from him felt really nice

He called me gorgeous and charmed me

They made me feel special because they paid attention to me, I like that because no one else does

No one has shown an interest in me like this before

He told me I was special and that I was the only one he wanted to be with

He is really nice, and I really do trust him. There is no way he would hurt me

Some sex offenders use charm or fake love to groom children, but it doesn't feel fake to the children. In these quotes, children explain how nice the abuser made them feel and how positive the grooming process felt. This is rarely talked about when discussing how to work with children who have been sexually abused or exploited, because professionals see the grooming process as so harmful and abusive that they can forget that the child does not hold the same perspective.

It is common for children to have mixed emotions when they realise (or are told) that they were groomed and abused, because their subjective experience of that process does not match our description of a deceptive sexual offence against them. Not only this, but even when children understand they were abused, they may still have memories that are positive, pleasurable or warm. The abuser might have been the only person that made them feel loved or special. Simply telling a child that everything they believed to be loving and positive was actually a planned sexual offence is rarely enough for them to understand or accept that they are a victim of sexual abuse.

Children who do come to accept that they were groomed and abused can still hold heavy feelings of guilt, especially when they realise that they did have positive or pleasurable experiences during the grooming or the offences. They may also feel guilty if they still love their abuser. It is important that this learning is kept in mind when working with children who have been sexually abused and exploited.

When children have been groomed to hold a belief, and then that positive belief in the sex offender has been repeatedly reinforced, it is unwise to simply tell the child that they are wrong until they 'get it'. It takes time and it takes careful conversation and therapy to lead a child to a safe place where they can look at what the abuser was 'really doing'.

Grooming Though Fear and Violence

Quotes from real children who called Childline in 2012:

He told me he would kill my mother
He said he would be sent to prison, and I would be put in care
They doused me in petrol and told me that if I didn't do it, they would set fire to me
If I try to stop seeing them, they will hit me
If I tell anyone what they are doing to me, they will hurt me
He told me that if I loved him, I should do things for him, and he started shouting at me that it was all my own fault

Some sex offenders use fear. Whilst the previous set of quotes was taken from children who had experienced a grooming process by a sex offender who chose to use intimacy, affection and charm, some sex offenders do not use positive communication at all. Some begin positive and become negative. The use of violence and fear is sometimes associated to certain typologies of sex offenders in forensic psychological theory, meaning that some sex offenders will not use violence and fear and may be more adept or more likely to continue using charm, affection and positive communication no matter what the circumstance. However, the serious case reviews and other reports from high profile CSE cases are littered with examples of extreme violence, threats, stabbings, internal injuries, death threats towards family members, hoax calls telling children that their younger siblings will be raped and ultimatums if they disclosed or reported.

Fear is the most basic intimidation tactic, even if the threats are fake and would never have been carried through, children believe them because they have to. Many children have been threatened with the rape or murder of their family members, a child loves their family and wants to protect them (hence the sex offender choosing that threat) so the child is likely to do whatever they are being threatened to do. For these children, the grooming process may not feel as ambiguous or positive as the children who were being groomed using love and affection. These children may become quickly aware that they are in serious danger. However, this does not lead to quicker disclosure or a higher likelihood of reporting. Fear and actual violence is often successful at keeping children and adults from disclosing.

Grooming Using 'Exchange'

Quotes from real children who called Childline in 2012:

They would give me drugs, alcohol and money
She has been making me have sex with her and then buying me things in return
He was really nice to me. He bought me presents, gave me money and stuff
They make me go to their parties, get me drunk and then they do stuff with me
I am 13 and I have been doing stuff for money in his car

Some sex offenders use items or bribery, in CSE this is often called 'exchange'. However, as we have explored in other modules, the language and concept of exchange is debated, due to making the child sound as though they were actively exchanging sex for items or bribes rather than being raped

by adults. Sex offenders of all kinds, including CSA and CSE offenders will use bribery when required or when suitable. Sometimes this is because the sex offender realises that there is a gap. Sometimes it is because the sex offender has no other skills or techniques, so instead of charm or fear, they use something easily accessible like money or cigarettes. This is not an exchange for being raped, although many practitioners do still see it that way.

A group of survivors from Rotherham have challenged the concept of 'exchange' by arguing that just because they were given alcohol does not mean they were 'exchanging' it for sex, they were being raped and violently injured. This is not a two-way exchange. The child is being harmed. However, whilst they make an excellent point, many children do feel that because they took something after or before the abuse, or offenders actually gave them money (sometimes as little as £2) for being raped, the children feel they were colluding, or even feel as though they were 'sex working' or 'selling themselves'.

The concept of exchange makes it more difficult for children to understand that they were innocent victims of abuse, especially older children who might think that being made to have sex with a few people and then being given a takeaway, £20 and some vodka is an equal swap. Much more debate needs to occur on this point, and we need to ensure that when we are supporting children who have been abused using bribes or gifts; we do not teach them that they 'exchanged sex for something' because this is not strictly accurate, and this creates an illusion of agency where there was none.

The 'Grooming Line' and Why Grooming Is Not A Linear Process



The above 'Grooming Line' was originally developed and shared by Barnardos. It has been used extensively in the training of practitioners all over the UK, despite being oversimplified and inaccurate. The main issues with the grooming line are explained below and then illustrated with case studies of real cases of grooming that do not fit the model.

When we use oversimplified and generalised models like this one to teach thousands of professionals how children are groomed, we teach them that all sex offenders work in the same way. We teach them that sex offenders target children, form a friendship, then trick them into a loving relationship and then begin abusing them right at the end of that process. As we have seen from the previous sections, this is not the case and it is inadequate to allow practitioners to believe that all sex offenders are broadly the same, following this pattern or routine.

Applying the grooming line to children assumes that we have time to burn before intervening. It assumes that the 'harm' comes at the end. One of the biggest issues is that the grooming line only shows harm at the end of the process, rather than the entire process harming the child. This can lead to interventions that adopt a 'watch and wait' attitude rather than protecting the child immediately, and it can also lead to practitioners misunderstanding that online sexual offenders may not ever want to get into any of those stages of abuse, because they don't need to. Why would they develop a friendship and relationship with anyone online when they can pose as someone else, get some images from a child and then blackmail them with them?

Whenever this diagram is used, it includes arrows. The arrows usually move consistently towards abuse. However, what we do know from established experts such as Finkelhor, is that sex offenders

will move backwards through processes and forward again until they are ready to commit the sexual offence. They may not ever get past a certain stage of abuse or preparation of an offence. The grooming line is oversimplified and ignores previous research in this area. Sex offenders are not mindless robots moving towards an end goal, they are humans that assess the situation and make decisions, they speed up and they slow down, they stop, and they change their tactic, they might start off being positive and then become aggressive, they might use fear and then love and then fear again to groom a child. Often, sex offenders use everything available to them; fear, love, money, alcohol, threats, violence, charm, promises, bribery, blackmail.

Lucy's Experience of Grooming

I was at my older sister's birthday party at her house, it was busy and loud, and my sister was having fun with her friends, so I was on my own in the kitchen. A bloke was leaning on the worktop drinking vodka and I was watching him neck it back like water. He asked me if I had ever tried vodka and I said no. He called me a kid and said I wouldn't dare drink it anyway. It really annoyed me that he called me a kid. He poured a glass of vodka and dared me to drink it. I was hesitant and he started laughing at me and said he knew I wouldn't do it. I picked it up and drank it as quick as possible. It burned my throat and my nose. I don't remember much after that, I woke up on a bed in a room with my jeans down. This bloke was stood over me, laughing. He said he had photos of me, and I better do what he said. He flicked through his iPhone and showed me loads of pictures of me half naked. He said he would put them on the internet if I didn't do stuff to him. It was disgusting. I was nearly sick.



It is clear to see that Lucy's experience above does not fit the grooming line. There is no friendship and no loving relationship.

The Power of Grooming

The psychological manipulation and abuse that goes into a careful grooming process can significantly affect the way a child views the abuser, themselves and the rest of the world. A connection forged by an abuser can still serve people for years and even for the rest of their lives. Below are some examples of young people who are now free from their abusers, some are now adults and yet the grooming is still effective:

I still can't bring myself to report my abusers because I don't want them to get into trouble

We've been writing letters to each other the whole time he has been in prison. We miss each other so much. When he gets out, I'll be 19 and we are going to get married!

Everyone keeps saying words like 'grooming' and 'child sexual exploitation' but they just don't understand. We love each other. He would never hurt me. They don't get it.

Despite everything she did to me, I love her so much. I would never wish harm on her. It was different times back then. She is old and frail now. There is no need to bring it up.

Improving Our Understanding of Grooming

Grooming is often described as a slow, careful process in which an offender goes through stages of being friendly, nice, intimate, loving, imitating a relationship and then turns to abuse and harm. This

assumption is dangerous for our practice with children because we then expect the process to take a long time and we misunderstand the level of harm that is occurring to the child. We assume that the harm to the child occurs at the end of the linear process, which ignores the harm that the grooming and preparatory offences does. When an adult manipulates, deceives and coerces a child, they are still harming them, and that child will be affected by that part of the process.

Grooming could take a few hours online or 6 months face to face. Equally, grooming could take a few hours face to face and 6 months online. We should not make assumptions or guesstimates about the length of time it might take. Online grooming is getting a lot of coverage and consideration recently, but there is still the misunderstanding that sex offenders use fake profiles online to attempt to meet children face to face: both of which are stereotypes.

First of all, research has shown us that most sex offenders who groom children online do not use fake profiles (EOGP, 2012). The children know they are talking to adults, and they are encouraged to keep it secret. Second, there is an entire typology of sex offenders that are not interested in meeting with children face to face, they abuse them and cause harm over the internet and they are not motivated to risk a meeting at all. Some of them are suitably aroused and satisfied by abusing children online and have never abused a child physically.

When children have been groomed carefully by a sex offender, we should not expect a child to be able to disclose, report or talk about their abuse easily or objectively. Children may love the sex offender and even when the abuse is stopped or disrupted, they may miss them, yearn for them or even protect them from prosecution. Children may not acknowledge or understand that they have been abused and become hostile to services and practitioners. When any of these problems arise, it is important that we do not see the problem as sitting within the child. It is vital that we see the child as a victim of effective grooming by a skilled sex offender. We must not blame them for being a victim of manipulation and sexual offences against them.

For more information about grooming or victim blaming, please visit www.victimfocus.org.uk or contact Jessica on jessica@victimfocus.org.uk