

How to Recognize Online Grooming



Sometimes the very reason kids and teens blog and spend time on social-networking sites is to “meet new friends.” So it’s not always easy for them to tell when “new friends” have bad intentions, and research has shown that as much as 14% of kids receive unwanted sexual solicitations online.

“Grooming” is the way sexual predators get from bad intentions to sexual exploitation. Basically, grooming is manipulation. It’s the process pedophiles use to get young people they target online to meet with them offline, the simple goal being sex.

Sometimes it involves flattery, sometimes sympathy, other times offers of gifts, money, or modeling jobs. It can also involve all of the above over extended periods of time. That’s why it’s called “grooming.” Experts say the short-term goal of these manipulators is for the victim to feel loved or just comfortable enough to want to meet them in person, and these people know that sometimes takes time. That’s ok, they’d say, because groomers tend to have a lot of patience, and they also tend to “work” a number of targets at once, telling all of them that they are “the only one for me.” You can imagine how well that can work with kids seeking sympathy, support, or validation online.

That’s about as general as we can get, because grooming is carefully individualized. Groomers design what they say as they go along, tailoring their flattery or offers as they learn about the victim.

If you believe your child or a child you know may be a victim of grooming, please contact the organizations below:

- **Australia: NetAlert** - www.netalert.gov.au
- **Canada: Cybertip!ca** - www.cybertip.ca
- **UK: Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre** - www.ceop.gov.uk
- **US: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children** - www.CyberTipLine.com

For additional countries or emergency situations, please contact your local authorities.

Here are some tactics kids can watch out for:

These are themes for which there are many variations; tell your kids.

TACTIC	INTENT
“Let’s go private.”	Engage in private conversation through a separate chat room, instant messaging, or phone texting
“Where’s your computer in the house?”	Determine if parents or caregivers are in close proximity
“Who’s your favorite band? Designer? Film? Gear?”	Discover what types of gifts to offer - e.g. concert tickets, clothing, CDs
“I know someone who can get you a modeling job.”	Flattery
“I know a way you can earn money fast.”	Appeal to a young person’s natural interest in earning spending money
“You seem sad. Tell me what’s bothering you.”	Show sympathy to encourage child to confide in groomer and potentially pull them away from family support
“What’s your phone number?”	Establish off-line contact - usually happens at a later stage, after the target feels comfortable with the groomer
“If you don’t... [do what I ask], I’ll... [tell your parents OR share your photos in a photo blog / Webcam directory / file-sharing network].”	Intimidation and manipulation - used as the groomer learns more and more about the target
“You are the love of my life.”	Manipulation - becoming appealing to someone by making him or her feel special and building companionship

Parents and caregivers should talk to their kids about these tactics, and kids should know to inform their parents or caregivers if they ever encounter them. Being aware of the signs of online grooming - and the fact that groomers are self-taught experts in 1) getting kids to reveal their needs and desires and 2) tailoring messages to those interests - can go a long way toward protecting kids from sexual exploitation online. It’s also a great exercise in critical thinking, the best safeguard and “filter” a young Internet user can have.

For more information on Internet Safety tips for you and your family, go to: www.childnet.com, www.connectsafely.org, www.trendmicro.com/go/safety.