

IDENTIFYING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION FACT SHEET FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

As a parent or carer, you play a crucial role in keeping all children and young people safe and protected from abuse by knowing how to spot the signs of sexual exploitation and understanding how to best respond.

WHAT IS SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

Sexual exploitation is a real threat for all children and young people. Your child is not too young to be a victim and it can happen to children of any background. All members of the community including parents and carers share a moral obligation to protect children and young people from harm.

Child sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse where offenders (acting as themselves or under a false identity), use their power, be that physical, financial or emotional, over a child or young person, to sexually or emotionally abuse them.

It often involves situations and relationships where young people receive something (food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money etc.), in return for participating in sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur in person or online, and sometimes the child or young person may not even realise they are a victim.

Child sexual exploitation can be hard to identify, however there are warning signs. It is critical that you are able to recognise the signs of sexual exploitation, as you may be the only adult in a position to identify and respond to suspected abuse.

These resources will help you spot the signs of sexual exploitation and provide you with guidance on how to best respond when you have concerns about your child's welfare.

This factsheet includes explicit descriptions of abuse and may be distressing to engage with for some people. If you need to talk to someone, it is recommended that you speak to your GP or another allied health professional.

HOW DOES SEXUAL EXPLOITATION HAPPEN?

Child sexual exploitation can take many forms but some of the common situations in which it can occur include:

INAPPROPRIATE RELATIONSHIP

This usually involves an individual who exercises inappropriate power or control over a young person. There may be a significant age gap. The victim may believe they are in a loving relationship or friendship initially, but the relationship then changes. The offender uses their power over the young person to coerce, intimidate and continue the abuse.

PARTNER

Another young person befriends and grooms the victim into a sexual relationship by presenting as an ideal partner. They then force or coerce the victim into having sex with them, friends or associates, for social status, financial or other gain.

ORGANISED EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING

Organised sexual exploitation is the most sophisticated form of child exploitation. There are often links between abusers, and victims are moved between networks (internal trafficking). Young people (often connected) are passed through networks, possibly over geographical distances, between towns and cities where they may be forced into sexual activity.

FORCED MARRIAGE

Forced marriage is where a child or young person is subject to a marriage without their consent, arranged for by their immediate or extended family, is also a form of sexual exploitation and constitutes a criminal offence.

WHAT IS GROOMING?

Grooming is when a person engages in predatory conduct to prepare a child or young person for sexual activity at a later time. Grooming can include communicating and/or attempting to befriend or establish a relationship or other emotional connection with the child, young person or their parent/carer.

Young people are often 'groomed' before they are sexually abused. At first they may be tricked into thinking they are in a safe and normal relationship, so they may not know it is happening or may feel they have no choice but to be abused.

Sometimes it is hard to see when someone is being groomed until after they have been sexually abused. Grooming behaviour may look like "normal" caring behaviour, however this is not always the case.

EXAMPLES OF GROOMING BEHAVIOUR MAY INCLUDE:

- giving gifts or special attention to a child or their parent or carer, making the child feel special or indebted to an adult
- making close physical contact sexual, such as inappropriate tickling or wrestling/'play fighting'
- openly exposing or pretending to accidentally expose the victim to nudity, sexual material and sexual acts (this in itself is classified as child sexual abuse but can also be a precursor to physical sexual assault)
- controlling a child through threats, force or use of authority, making the child fearful to report unwanted behaviour.

Groomers may rely on mobile phones, social media, and the internet to interact with children and young people in inappropriate ways and will often ask the child to keep their relationship a secret. The grooming process may continue for months before the offender arranges a physical meeting.

'Grooming' is now a criminal offence under the Crimes Act 1958. This offence targets predatory conduct undertaken by an adult to prepare a child, under the age of 16, to engage in a sexual activity at a later time.

HOW DOES GROOMING HAPPEN?

There are many different ways in which grooming can occur and it may even be parents, carers or other adults who supervise young people, who are targeted by this behaviour.

While the box below describes some of the ways in which grooming can happen, grooming will not always look like this. Offenders are deceptive and manipulative in the way they work, so it is important to draw on a range of information, such as the warning signs of sexual exploitation, if you have concerns. Warning signs include but are not limited to:

1) TARGETING

The groomer could be a male or female and may look for a young person or a group of young people in places such as schools, parks or by creating false profiles on the internet. They may show an interest in the child or young person, and perhaps offer the child or young person something, for example, a cigarette, food and drink or someone to talk to for support.

2) RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The groomer may want to keep contact with their target and even isolate them from their supportive networks. They may give them a mobile phone, make them feel special by complimenting them or do favours for them such as giving them lifts and planning fun activities. This may lead to the child spending less time with their friends and family.

3) FAKE LOVING RELATIONSHIP OR FRIENDSHIP

Victims may enter a fake loving relationship or friendship with the groomer. Within the fake friendship, children and young people may be introduced to sex through, for example, porn or watching sexual acts. The victim may think everything is fine and that they are in control but the groomer is slowly gaining more control.

4) CONTROL AND REINFORCEMENT

The groomer may attempt to entrap the victim by getting them to do things that can be dangerous and/or against the law like drinking, taking/selling drugs or criminal activity. This may lead to the child or young person being forced to do sexual favours in return for not being hurt or exposed. This may include violence or threats of violence.

5) VICTIMISATION

The child or young person may be forced into having sex with others for something they need or want, by either force or persuasion. Groomers can persuade their victims to undertake sexual activities, like being filmed performing sexual acts, by using emotional blackmail, and by making it sound normal.

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS?

Victims of abuse are unlikely to tell anyone that they are being abused. They may think they are in a loving relationship or friendship, or that they have no choice. That's why it's vital to be able to spot the signs of child sexual exploitation.

There may be many reasons for changes in your child's behaviour, but if you notice a combination of worrying signs, it is time to seek help or advice. If your child is a victim of grooming, blackmail or sexual abuse, they may show some or all of the following recognisable signs:

- regular absences from school, missing training, work or other activities
- going missing for long periods or frequently staying out overnight
- being dishonest about where they've been and whom they've been with
- developing an unusually close connection with an older person
- displaying mood changes (hyperactive, secretive, hostile, aggressive, impatient, resentful, anxious, withdrawn, depressed)
- using street/different language or copying the way a new friend may speak

- talking about new friends who don't belong to their normal social circle
- coming home with gifts or money given by the new friends
- having large amounts of money, which they cannot account for
- using a new mobile phone (possibly given to them by a new friend), excessively making calls, videos or sending text messages
- being very secretive about their phone, internet and social media use
- using drugs (physical evidence includes spoons, aluminum foil, 'tabs', 'rocks' or pieces of ripped cardboard)
- assuming a new name, being in possession of false identification, a stolen passport or driver's licence
- being picked up by an older person or new friend from home or school, or down the street.

Your child may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation if you notice, or they disclose any of the following in their relationship/s:

- threats to end their relationship if they don't have sex
- demands that they have sex with other people
- expectations to provide sex in return for food, a place to stay, drugs or gifts
- threats to cease the relationship if sexual 'dares' are not carried out
- receiving money in return for sexual acts
- requests to provide sexual photos or sharing sexual photos online or via text
- threats to humiliate or share sexual images of victims if they don't carry out sexual acts.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?

Sexual exploitation can happen to children of any age, background, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation and vulnerability. Offenders can be from any background; they can be women, men or other children.

Whilst any child can be victim to sexual abuse, children who are vulnerable, isolated and/or have a disability are much more likely to be victimised and are a significantly over-represented group.

USEFUL RESOURCES

WARNING SIGNS

<http://knowaboutcse.co.uk/spot-the-signs/>

SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE BY AGE

http://childwise.blob.core.windows.net/assets/uploads/files/SpeakUp_booklet_VIC.pdf

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES BY AGE TRAUMA INDICATORS

<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-service-providers/children,-youth-and-families/child-protection/specialist-practice-resources-for-child-protection-workers/child-development-and-trauma-specialist-practice-resource>

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING BULLY STOPPERS GROOMING FACT SHEET

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/bullystoppers/smgrooming.pdf>

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND REGULATION 'GROOMING' OFFENCE FACT SHEET

<http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/home/safer+communities/protecting+children+and+families/grooming+offence>

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND REGULATION 'FAILURE TO DISCLOSE' OFFENCE FACT SHEET

<http://assets.justice.vic.gov.au/justice/resources/ea484f74-feb7-400e-ad68-9bd0be8e2a40/failure+to+disclose.pdf>

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND REGULATION 'FAILURE TO PROTECT' OFFENCE FACT SHEET

<http://assets.justice.vic.gov.au/justice/resources/790183f8-3ad0-41c4-bbc4-08d9a0bd8618/failure-to-protect.pdf>

SEXTING

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/advice sexting.aspx>

CASE STUDIES

Maya's Story - <http://knowaboutcse.co.uk/mayas-story/>

Jake's story - <http://knowaboutcse.co.uk/jakes-story/>