

Behind the Smile: Uncovering the Warning Signs of Grooming, Part 1
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Editor's Note: This is part 1 of a 2-part series on this topic.

By educating ourselves on the signs and tactics used in grooming, we empower families, employees and volunteers working with children and communities to protect potential victims, intervene early, and create safer environments.

“Wherever a child or vulnerable person is safe, there you serve and honour Christ.”

- His Holiness Pope Francis, Message of the Holy Father to the Participants at the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, March 20, 2025

In 2021, Pope Francis made extensive revisions to canon law, which is a system of laws and regulations that governs the universal Catholic Church.¹ Now, in the revisions to Book VI, there is an explicit criminalization of sexual grooming.² The change in church law represented the first official recognition of grooming as a means of building a relationship with a child targeted for sexual exploitation.



Fundamentally a subtle, insidious and deceptive process that often mirrors innocent interaction between an adult and a child, grooming behaviors permit the offender to manipulate and gain trust.

This can often make it difficult for children and adults to recognize inappropriate behavior of the groomer until significant harm has already occurred. Grooming behaviors, while often a precursor to sexual abuse, still by themselves can result in harm to the child through psychological, emotional and physical consequences. These can include mental health issues, relationship difficulties, lower self-esteem and other results. By educating ourselves on the signs and tactics used in grooming, we empower families, employees and volunteers working with children and communities to protect potential victims, intervene early, and create safer environments.



Recent research has found a reduction in the national prevalence of child sexual abuse, primarily resulting from increased awareness among the general population, as well as intentional prevention, detection and interventions of youth serving organizations.³ Because sexual offending is largely opportunistic and often a nuanced process,⁴ understanding the role grooming plays in sexual abuse is important in both the detection and prevention of harm to children.

While many definitions of grooming exist, researchers generally describe grooming as being:

- A manipulative process by which a person prepares a child, others around the child, and the community, to obtain greater access to be able to abuse the child.
- A process of gaining access to the child, using manipulation to reduce the child's resistance and maintain the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure.
- A process serving to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, to justify or deny their actions and the impact of their actions, and to avoid culpability and repercussions.

Experts consider the grooming of the victim and those surrounding the victim as a core component of child sexual abuse.⁵ In a recent study, almost 83% of offenders convicted of a sexual offense against a child acknowledged engaging in grooming behavior prior to the act of sexual abuse.⁶ In a separate study of adult survivors of child sexual abuse, over 99% of participants experienced at least one sexual grooming behavior, with an average of over 14 sexual grooming behaviors per survivor.⁷

Through the grooming and selection process, the majority of abusers targeted a trusting child victim (68%) or a child with low self-esteem (61%). The most frequently reported sexual grooming behaviors also included the abuser arranging activities alone with the child (57%), showing the child large amounts of attention (56%) and using seemingly innocent touching—at least at first (51%).

Because grooming conduct can appear to be innocent in nature and can mimic appropriate interactions between adults and children, sometimes it is more easily identified in retrospect after the abuse becomes known to others. Nonetheless, understanding grooming is crucial to heighten awareness of behaviors that should serve as red flag warning signs of inappropriate behavior. Grooming is often undertaken while keeping up the appearance of being kind, charming, and helpful.⁸ The process of grooming a victim can span days to years, and serves many purposes.⁹ Grooming may take place in a variety of contexts, including in-person, online, and in community, organizational, educational, religious and sports settings—in other words, in any circumstance where an adult can obtain access to a child.¹⁰

If you observe or become aware of any potential grooming behaviors, even if you are skeptical of the motivation or purpose of the behavior, communicate this concern to the appropriate entity. Typically, this would be the supervisor of the adult committing the grooming behaviors, or someone in a leadership position with the organization. If you become aware of or have a suspicion of actual child sexual abuse, contact the child protective services agency in your state, or local law enforcement.

Conclusion

Shortly prior to his death, His Holiness Pope Francis reminded us, in his message to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, that “abuse prevention is not a blanket to be spread over emergencies, but one of the foundations on which to build communities faithful to the Gospel.”¹¹ His words remind us that we are all charged with the obligation of being vigilant at all times in not only detecting, but in preventing the abuse of children. By understanding and recognizing the potential signs of sexual grooming, we can fulfill our role in earnestly protecting children and the vulnerable.

References

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- 11 Id. note 1.

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