

Sexual Abuse: The Six Stages of Grooming

As we know from Sheldon Kennedy, and many other young people and adults who have survived similar experiences, children are often sexually abused without anyone noticing or knowing what to do if they do see what's happening. This is because sexual abusers groom the child and the family.

According to the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, grooming is a gradual and escalating process of where an adult, usually an adult known the child and the family, builds trust and comfort with a child using subtle, manipulative techniques. These techniques separate the child from their family and peers by making the child feel special.

Child sex offenders also build relationships with the adults around the child so that their involvement is welcomed and encouraged. Grooming usually begins with behaviours that do not appear to be inappropriate and that make it seem that the offender is good with children.

Dr. Michael Welner, associate professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine, outlines six stages of grooming that lead sexual abuse:

Stage 1: Targeting the victim

The offender targets a child by looking for vulnerabilities: is the child emotionally needy, are they isolated or lonely, do they have low self-confidence, are family lives challenging or unstable.

Stage 2: Gaining the victim's trust

The sex offender gains trust by watching and gathering information about the child, getting to know their needs and how to fill them. So, offenders blend in effortlessly with responsible caretakers because they generate warm and focused attention.

Stage 3: Filling a need

Once the offender understands what the child needs, they begins to fill those needs: if the child is from a family that struggles financially, the offender provides gifts, if the child is lonely or experiencing emotional turmoil the offender acts as a trusted friend and confidant, if the child or family dreams of the child becoming a professional athlete, the offender will promise that they are the coach that can help them realize this dream. As a result of these attentions, the offender gains importance in the child's life.

Stage 4: Isolating the child

The offender uses this developing special relationship with the child to create situations in which they are alone together. Tutoring, coaching and special trips all enable isolation.

A special relationship is reinforced further when an offender creates a belief that they can provide something that no one else, not even a parent, can provide. In sport, parents may unintentionally support this if they believe the offender can and will take their child to higher and higher levels of sport.

Stage 5: Sexualizing the relationship

When the child is emotionally dependent and trusting, the offender begins to sexualize the relationship through sexual conversations, pictures, even creating situations, like going swimming, in which both offender and victim are naked. This behaviour begins to desensitize the child and normalize sex in the relationship.

Stage 6: Initiating Abuse and maintaining control

At this final stage, the offender initiates sex with the child. Once the sex abuse is occurring, offenders commonly use secrecy and blame to maintain the child's continued participation and silence.

For more information on sexual abuse and grooming, go to [The Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#).