



PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FROM GROOMING

Grooming

Everyone working and volunteering in sports and physical activity needs to be aware of the grooming process, so that steps can be taken to prevent children from being sexually harmed. These areas will be covered in this guide.

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About Grooming

The term 'grooming' is commonly used to describe the process of entrapping and preparing a child, the adults around them and even the environment to enable abuse to take place. Grooming is a core part of many cases of sexual abuse, but children and young people can also be groomed for radicalisation or criminal exploitation. Sexual abuse can happen anywhere including in organisations like sports and community clubs, online and even in public spaces. Accepting this fact is often the first step to preventing a child in your club from being harmed.

How grooming happens

We know that people who set out to harm children will use a range of tactics to trick and entrap a child, these often include:

- Seeking access – looking for jobs or volunteer roles with regular contact with children and actively seeking out organisations with unclear boundaries and policies.

- Testing the culture – breaking small rules to test whether they are challenged about their behaviour. If left unchallenged it provides the environment for these policy breaches to escalate.
- Building trust – giving advice, attention, or gifts to build a trusting relationship with the child and sometimes the whole family. Trying to appear respectable and even indispensable to the adults in the organisation.
- Exploiting power – using a power imbalance to take control and make a child feel dependent or isolated, such as having authority over how a child progresses in their sport.
- Keeping secrets – using secrets to control, frighten or test the compliance of a child, increasing the feelings of shame and guilt put on the child to encourage their silence.
- Manipulation – using reverse psychology or strategic withdrawal to trick the child into thinking they are in control of the situation.
- Online - using social media and messaging apps as a tool to manipulate a child, pretending to be someone they are not, pressuring a child into sending pictures and then threatening to share them. In sport, this means the grooming process can take place away from the organised activity and progress at greater speed.

Online grooming

Online grooming is when someone uses the internet to trick, force or pressure a young person into doing something sexual - like sending a naked video or image of themselves.

Someone who is grooming others online will sometimes build their trust before talking about doing anything sexual. A groomer will be subtle at first and will often:

- Send lots of messages via different online platforms such as Facebook and chatrooms.
- Ask to keep the messages secret suggesting it is 'their little secret'.
- Ask if they trust them.
- Ask if anyone else such as family or friends use the computer or other electronic device.
- Send compliments about their appearance.
- Ask questions such as 'have you ever been kissed?'
- Ask for personal information such as where they live or which school they go to.

- Ask to keep in contact all the time.
- Try to persuade the person to send sexual images. They may say they will be hurt or upset if they don't.
- Use blackmail, such as threatening to send images to people they know if they don't send more.

Who harms children?

People who abuse children can be any gender and any age, including other young people. People who abuse will often hold positions of trust or authority and may take steps to manipulate those around them to ensure they are perceived as respectable, reliable and trustworthy. This means they can look like any other member of the community.

They do not necessarily look like our perceptions of the 'monsters' we hear about in the news. If an abuser was easy to identify from appearance, then children would avoid them, and adults would ensure they were prevented from gaining access to children.

We do know that approximately 90-95% of those who sexually abuse children are male (Office for National Statistics: [Child sexual abuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2019](#)).

Signs of grooming

In a sports environment, some signs a child is being abused may include:

- Sudden changes in participation.
- Avoiding club sessions or training.
- Changes in behaviour such as becoming withdrawn.
- Fear of certain places or areas.
- Fear of certain people.

Other signs may be more noticeable away from the sports environment, such as:

- Developing a problem with their mental health and wellbeing.
- Secretive use of phones and tablets.
- Having unexplained gifts.
- Inappropriate sexualised knowledge.
- Alcohol or drug misuse.
- Having a much older 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'.
- Developing sexual health problems.

Children at risk

Sexual abuse can affect any child. However, abusers will target children who appear to be vulnerable in a way they can exploit such as children in care, children with low self-esteem

and children experiencing difficulties with their peers or families. This is because they perceive these children to be easier to manipulate and isolate from potentially protective adults or friends. In sport, a child may be vulnerable because of their dependence on an individual for their progress in the sport or even their place in the team or squad.

Secrecy

It is rare for a child to tell an adult about being tricked and groomed. Children may not speak about it for many reasons including, feelings of embarrassment, fear of not being believed, not recognising the situation as abusive or because they are dependent on the person causing harm.

Prevention

There are steps you can take to reduce the risk of grooming behaviour taking place in your club, these include:

- Follow **safer recruitment** procedures - including references and checks for those volunteering or working with children.
- Enforce **codes of conduct** – those who want to harm children often begin by breaking small rules to test the governance of an organisation. If an organisation has solid codes of conduct, they can more easily challenge those small infringements which discourages the escalation of the rule breaches.
- Provide **training** and education – ensure a level of consistency about what is and is not acceptable behaviour and ensuring everyone has at least the minimum level of understanding of what is acceptable.
- Set out clear **reporting** steps – so that everyone knows concerns will be handled correctly, in a proportionate manner while maintaining confidentiality.
- Ensure **online safety** policies and codes of conduct include guidance on appropriate communication, particularly if the club is carrying out remote coaching or using social media apps to communicate with children or parents.
- Listen to children – **involving children** and their opinions in decisions and hearing what they have to say also means they are more likely to speak up if they have concerns.
- Have an open culture – by encouraging discussions about what is and is not acceptable behaviour you provide children with the language and opportunity to

share concerns and you make the organisation less appealing to those who would seek out vulnerable organisations to harm children.

More Information

Protecting children from grooming – NSPCC Learning, information for professionals

Grooming – NSPCC, information for parents

NWG Network – tackling child sexual exploitation

Helplines

Childline tel: 0800 1111 – for children and young people aged 18 and under

NSPCC Helpline tel: 0808 800 5000 or email: help@nspcc.org.uk – helping adults to protect children

Stop It Now! tel: 0808 1000 900 – UK and Ireland