

## **Child sexual abuse and the "grooming" process**

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*By Kate*

Survivors of child sexual abuse often find it difficult to place the blame for their abuse where it really lies – on the shoulders of the perpetrator/s. The perpetrator may twist aspects of the abuse around so that the child is made to feel at fault or somehow complicit in the abuse, for example by telling the child that the abuse is their fault, by masking the abuse as “punishment”, engaging them in the abuse, by entwining the abuse together with expressions of love and affection or perhaps by manipulating the child to initiate incidents of abuse. A child cannot truly understand the power-play and the control that the perpetrator has in these situations and will often take that self-blame and internalise it. As an adult survivor, this internalisation of self-blame and responsibility for the abuse can lead to feelings of worthlessness, guilt, depression, self-hatred, inability to self-care and risky behaviours, among many others. Understanding the many ways in which an abuser targets their victim and “grooms” them for the sexual abuse can be one step towards placing the blame where it belongs and releasing it from the shoulders of the survivor.

For survivors who recovered/repressed their memories of sexual abuse, the memories can feel surreal, impossible, “crazy”. On a personal note, I was sexually abused as a child but through an incredible amount of denial managed to push it to the side and not think about it until I was older – when those memories did return though I thought I was crazy – my abuse took place in a kindergarten and I could not comprehend how people who devoted their days to looking after children could ever sexually abuse them. I thought I was making up these memories and didn't know what to believe – until I learned more about abusers and the grooming process and found out that actually many sexual abusers will place themselves in occupations where they have regular access to children. It was validating and reassuring to understand more about the tactics of an abuser.

The information below is especially relevant in cases where the abuser is a care-giver or has some form of a relationship with the child and is courtesy of the New South Wales Pre-trial Diversion of Offenders Program (1994).

### **Identification and Targeting**

Offenders have a special ability to identify and exploit children's vulnerabilities. For example, younger children are especially vulnerable as they do not have the language or knowledge to understand or tell others what is happening. Children who rely on the offender for care, love, affection or other things will also be vulnerable to the demands of the abuser.

## **Recruitment**

The offender uses a range of strategies to engage the child in a relationship where the abuse can happen and to desensitise the child to abusive behaviour.

### *Trust/Favouritism*

They will take deliberate steps to establish a relationship of trust, spending time with the child, listening to them, treating them as “special”, or perhaps giving them compliments/presents/favours.

### *Isolation/Secrecy*

The offender will isolate the child from their siblings and from the non-offending parent. The favouritism shown to the victim often promotes alienation from siblings. The offender may use the child as a “confidante”, sharing special secrets. Statements like “Mum wouldn't understand how special we are together”, “ours is a special love that others wouldn't understand” contribute to a climate of secrecy and alienate the child from the non-offending parent.

### *Desensitisation*

A process of desensitisation is used to test the child's resistance and engage them in the abuse. Offenders use “normal” situations and exploit these to abuse. For example they may use touching as a game or introduce sexual touching as “accidental”. They are likely to blur the boundaries of ordinary affection so the child confuses this with the abuse. This often occurs around the child's normal bathing, dressing and bedroom routines. They offender may engage the child in their own bathroom behaviour or use talk about sex and sexual jokes to blur boundaries about it.

Throughout the process of engaging the child in the abuse the offender is evaluating whether the child has been “groomed” sufficiently, i.e. whether they show interest, will not protest, will keep the secret.

## **Maintenance**

Perpetrators use careful planning, scheming and execution of strategies to groom the child to participate in sexual activities. There is a progression of acts over time and a checking of risks. The perpetrator will gain the compliance of the victim by:

- *Assuring the child of the “rightness” of what they are doing, e.g. through statements such as “this is a way we can show we love each other”, “I am teaching you”, “it's not doing any harm”.*
- *Telling the child the acts will not hurt them.*
- *Conveying the negative consequences of non-compliance or disclosure, e.g. through threats, conveying the illusion that the child is “free” to choose, that he/she has consented and that they are in a “relationship”*
- *Using bribes, threats, punishment*

While we all face similar struggles in the aftermath, it must be remembered that no two stories are the same and it is impossible to generalise the grooming tactics of perpetrators. It can help when working through guilt and self-blame as a survivor however to have some understanding of the stereotypical modus operandi of an abuser and how as a child you were the victim of a targeted and planned attack. What happened was not your fault and despite the messages you may have been given as a child and the words that were said to you it is important to remember one thing:

**You are not to blame – no child can ever hold responsibility for their own sexual abuse nor the actions of an adult.**

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