



THE ADULT GUIDE TO

Preventing Grooming



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PART
01

What is Grooming?

When you were a child, how many times were you told never to talk to strangers? Avoiding “stranger danger” may seem like a simple way to protect children, but the truth is that child sexual abuse usually happens much closer to home.

More than 90% of child sexual abuse cases are committed by someone the family trusts. This is most often a family member, but it may also be a family friend, babysitter, coach or teacher.

CAN YOU SPOT THE DIFFERENCE?

You can tell the difference between grooming and a healthy adult/child relationship by asking one important question: **Who is in control?**

 A **GROOMER** looks for ways to push boundaries and build a secret, special relationship with a child.

 A **SAFE ADULT** respects your family’s rules and stays in the ‘green’ zone with healthy boundaries.

Relationships move from safe to abuse through a common pattern:

Sexual abuse often begins gradually, through **grooming**. **Grooming is a pattern of behaviors an abuser can use to gain trust.** Grooming looks like a happy healthy relationship at first, and becomes abusive over time.

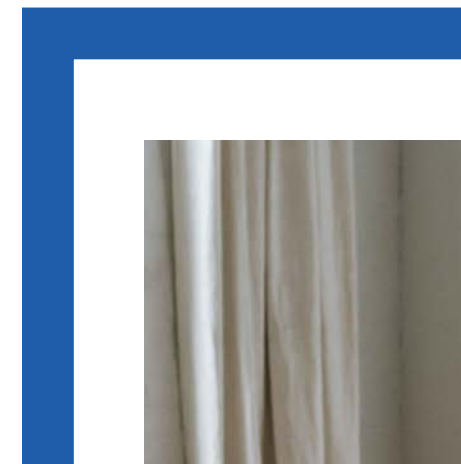
G	R	O	O	M	I	N	G
GOOD BEHAVIOR Age-appropriate talk, touch, and body boundaries	RESOURCES FOR FAMILY A “love-bombing” showering of gifts and attention.	OVERLY INTERESTED An adult gives one child special attention	ONE-ON-ONE TIME An adult looks for ways to spend time alone with the child	MATURITY MISMATCH Treats the child as if they were closer in age	IF YOU TELL ANYONE... Uses threats or tricks to get the child to keep secrets	NOBODY LOVES YOU LIKE I DO Isolates child from healthy relationships	GIVES HARMFUL SUBSTANCES Alcohol, drugs or pornography



Groomers Build Trust

Every family has different boundaries. These are the rules and values that parents set, like:

- Drinking, smoking/vaping, or other substances
- Swearing or offensive language
- Communication, such as social media or texting
- Physical boundaries, such as touch and privacy



It's important to know that **most adults do not want to hurt children**, and most people who care about a child are not grooming them for abuse. It's important and healthy for families to have trusted friends.

Grooming uses kindness to build a feeling of safety and trust.

The abuser can use this trust to become part of the family's "inner circle." **In this trusting relationship, boundaries can be crossed more easily.** Children may also hesitate to report abuse when they know the family trusts the abuser.

When caregivers know the signs of grooming, they can make informed choices about who spends time with their children and how.

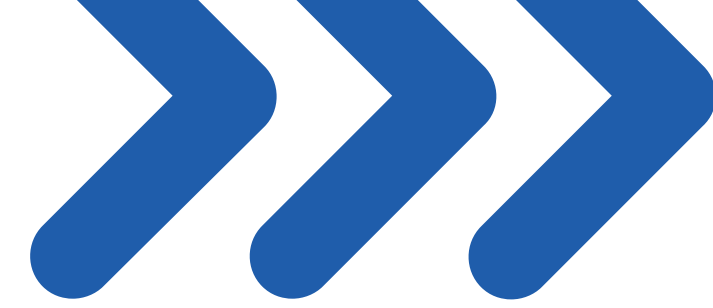
PART 03

Signs of Grooming



Adults could:

- **Seem more interested in friendship** with the child than with the parent.
- **Give one child special attention.** If the child has an interest such as a sport or video game, the person's attention may include gifts or conversations around it.
- **Offer to help the family with childcare, clothing, food, or rides.** The person might not wait for the family to ask, and they may not accept a "no thank you."
- **Touch the child without their permission.** It may begin with simple pats on the back and then move to hugs, kisses, or massages.
- **Not honor the rules and boundaries** of the parents.
- **Ask the child to keep secrets**, even about small things.
- **Not give the child age-appropriate privacy** for using the bathroom, bathing, or dressing.
- **Treat the child as if they were older.** They may tell a teen that they are mature for their age or share adult problems with them.
- **Tell the child that they love and care for them** more than anyone else.
- **Talk to the child in a mature or sexual way.** This includes boyfriend/girlfriend talk, inappropriate jokes, exchanging photos.
- **Control a child through threats or blame**, for example, "If you tell anyone about this, we will both be in trouble."
- **Give harmful substances** to the child, such as alcohol, drugs, or pornography.



Children or teens may respond by:

- **Becoming withdrawn or isolated.** They may lose interest in activities or friends, and spend more time alone.
- **Avoiding certain situations or people.**
- **Showing sudden, unusual mood changes.** They may become depressed, fearful, angry, or feel a need to be perfect.
- **Keeping secrets:** they may hide things, avoid letting anyone see their phone or computer, or cover their body with more clothing than usual.
- **Complaining of physical problems** like stomach pain, headaches, or trouble sleeping.



PART
04

Online Grooming

An adult could befriend a child in a game, website, or social media. They will collect information about their life and interests, and then lead them into a dangerous relationship.

Online grooming has a few key differences:

- **An online groomer is more likely to be a stranger.** Online predators can reach thousands of children, and even one response is a success.
- **It is much easier for an online groomer to pretend to be a peer.** Children may make a friend in an online game. Teens may be lured in through a “secret crush” who claims to go to their school. This may lead the child to let their guard down and share information they would not tell a stranger.
- **The goal of online grooming is not usually an in-person meeting.** Instead, the groomer eventually asks for sexual photos or videos of the child. If the child sends these once, the person may threaten or scare them into sending more.



How can I protect my child online?

Be active in your child’s digital life. Learn about the websites and apps they want to use, and check with them often about what they’re seeing and doing. Remember, children under 13 cannot legally consent to sharing personal information online. Consider safety systems such as parental control software, family sharing apps, and webcam covers.

Avoid punishing your child or restricting their use if you do notice a problem. This may push them into more dangerous online spaces you can’t monitor as easily.

Model appropriate internet use in your own digital life:

- Ask before you post pictures of your children.
- Be aware of the content you’re viewing around them, or the history they may see on shared accounts.
- Teach them how to identify risky ads, addresses and accounts.

Teach children digital safety tips:

- The internet is forever. Once you put something online, it is no longer in your control.
- People can pretend to be anything or anyone online.
- Do not open messages or photos from strangers.
- If anything you see or do feels uncomfortable, log off and tell an adult.

PART 05

Keeping Kids Safe

Children are at lower risk of abuse when they have active, involved caregivers who teach them early and often about safety and boundaries. Approach body safety like any other safety topic. Here are some simple ways families can protect against grooming and abuse:



Adults

- **Be involved in your child's activities.** This shows the adults in your child's life that you are paying attention. Show up at your child's daycare, stick around for soccer practice or piano lessons, or volunteer on a field trip.
- **For each of your child's activities, ask about policies for parent observation and one-on-one time.** Parents should always be allowed to observe their child's activities. When older youth are having a confidential visit with a doctor or counselor, the door should be unlocked and other staff aware of the visit.
- **Set boundaries on alone time with children, no matter the setting** (school, childcare, sports, lessons, or social situations). Be alert if someone insists that they need to be alone with a child.

Children or Teens

Check in with your child regularly. Even if they're not in the mood to talk, be sure they know you're always there to listen. You never know when they'll be ready to tell you something important.

Allow even very young children to have body boundaries:

- **Ask permission before hugging or kissing a child.** Never force a child to show physical affection, even with close family members.
- **Let children decide** when to end physical play like wrestling or tickling. One "stop" is enough.
- **Respect and protect** their right to say no.
- **Teach children** to respect the body boundaries of others.
- **Use the correct names** for body parts, including penis or vulva. This helps adults teach boundaries and gives children language and confidence to talk openly about their bodies.
- **Remember that children of all ages have the right to privacy.** Parents should be mindful of photos or stories they post on social media.

Responding to Grooming

If you notice a problem, take action right away. Adults and children often ignore their instincts because they want to be polite or avoid trouble. It's worth paying attention if you or a child has a bad feeling.

Use these tips to put a stop to problem behaviors and support children.

Adults

- **Be clear and direct if someone violates a boundary,** even if it's a close family member. You can simply say "I'm not comfortable with that."
- **You can also state family boundaries by saying things like:**
 - » "He gets to decide whether to give goodbye hugs."
 - » "Let's keep it PG in front of the kids."
- **Pay attention to how the person reacts to limits and boundaries.** A person who pushes back on a caregiver's limits will not respect the child's either.
- **If you suspect grooming or abuse,** reach out for assistance using the resources listed on page 14.



Children or Teens

- **Trust the child's judgment.** If a child tells you they feel uncomfortable around an adult, or describes grooming behavior, address the situation immediately.
- **If a child reports grooming or sexual abuse to you, listen carefully and do your best to stay calm.** Telling someone can be difficult, and the child has chosen you because they trust you to protect them.
- **Avoid "interviewing" the child.** Report the abuse to the police. A trained interviewer, sometimes called a forensic interviewer, will gather information in a sensitive way.



CHILDREN ARE NEVER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE BEHAVIORS OF ADULTS.

It is up to all adults in the community to protect children.

How to Get Help

SUPPORT

If you suspect a child is being abused, call local law enforcement or the Iowa Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-362-2178). To reach the Suicide Prevention Lifeline, call 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). As of July 2022, you can dial 988.

Your family support provider can help you with questions or concerns. This may be your family doctor, your local public health office, or the child's school. They can connect you with resources such as mental health treatment, support groups, and educational programs.

U.S. Center for Safe Sport prevents and responds to misconduct in youth sports. You can report concerns or find resources at [uscenterforsafesport.org](https://www.uscenterforsafesport.org).

EDUCATION

To find sexual abuse prevention programs in your community, visit pcaiowa.org or call 515-244-2200.

commonsensemedia.org – helps adults make informed media decisions (including apps and games) with children and youth.

Darkness to Light – empowers adults to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. d2l.org

safelyeverafter.com – prevention tips for parents and children.

[Whatsok.org](https://whatsok.org) – answers for teens about bodies, boundaries, and healthy relationships.

Youth Mental Health First Aid – teaches adults how to respond to a child or adolescent mental health emergency. Find a training at mentalhealthfirstaid.org.

SURVIVORS

National Sexual Assault Hotline – connect survivors with local crisis services. Call 1-800-656-4673.

Iowa Victim Service Call Center – resource for victims and survivors of crime in Iowa. Call 1-800-770-1650, or text IOWAHELP to 20121.

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) – more information on grooming plus survivor and adolescent resources. rainn.org



Remove this sheet to keep on hand.


Grooming Resource Sheet


Here's how adults can easily identify what both safe and abusive relationships between an adult and a child look like.

1. Grooming uses kindness to build a feeling of safety and trust.
2. Pay attention if your child becomes withdrawn or self-isolates, shows sudden, unusual mood changes, or avoids certain situations or people.
3. Be active in your child's digital life and remember children under 13 cannot legally consent to sharing personal information online.
4. Set and communicate clear boundaries with other adults in your child's life.
5. Check in with your child regularly.

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Treats the child as if they were closer in age

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Prevent Child Abuse Iowa™

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Iowa Victim Service Call Center	1-800-770-1650
Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network	rainn.org

PCAIOWA.ORG

**IF A CHILD IS IN IMMEDIATE
DANGER, CALL 911.**