A family guide to talking about grooming

Introduction

The online world plays an important part in most young people's lives. It provides many opportunities for learning, personal development, getting support or simply having fun.

The majority of people who use the internet have good intentions, with apps such as FaceTime, WhatsApp and Skype being popular ways to stay in touch with friends and family.

But while some individuals genuinely just want to chat, a small minority use the internet to contact children to sexually abuse them – either via video messaging and image sharing online, or by meeting them in person. This process is known as grooming, which may take months, or happen very quickly, possibly within minutes of first contact.

Being aware of these dangers is very important. This guide explains in more detail what grooming is, signs to look out for, and how you can help keep your child safe online.

What is grooming?

The term 'sexual grooming' refers to a process that usually begins with the offender building emotional connections with the child. This person may first pretend to be their friend or boyfriend/girlfriend, before then going on to use this 'relationship' – which can feel very real to the child – to manipulate them into sexual activity.

The child could be groomed by someone they know or a complete stranger. However it happens, groomers use a range of tactics to gain power and control over their intended victim. These include:

- **sexual chat, flirting and sharing pornographic content** such as images, video or words, etc.
- **positioning themselves in a non-sexual way** as a friend, fellow gaming enthusiast or mentor to gain the child's trust
- **bribing children with real or virtual gifts and offers** such as in-app currencies, social media 'likes', game cheats/accessories, fake modelling and music contracts
- **compliments, flattery and gaining the child's confidence** through sharing secrets – burdening them with the responsibility and/or using these against them

- **blackmail** – threatening to share a compromising image or information about the child or young person more widely
- **isolating the child from family and friends** – deliberately making them feel they're to blame for what's happening, and that they'll get into trouble if they seek help.

What makes some children more likely to be a victim of grooming?

Any child can be a victim. But they can be more vulnerable at particular times in their life or when experiencing difficulties such as loneliness, low self-esteem, family and relationship problems or when exploring their sexuality. It's emotional and physical vulnerabilities like these that an offender will seek out and exploit.

Online or in real life, grooming causes emotional harm

Research shows that the ongoing traumatic impact of online sexual abuse via video or images is likely to be just as severe as the impact of physical sexual abuse.

It's also important to be aware that sexual abuse can happen without grooming. An online example of this is when an offender might trick children into doing something sexual on camera and use this imagery to blackmail them in some way, e.g. 'If you don't do this for me, I'm going to post this video on YouTube, and share it with your friends'.

But however it happens, it's important to remember that if a child or young person is groomed, it is **never** their fault.

Spot the signs

It's not always obvious that a child is being groomed – some signs often appear as 'normal' teenage behaviour. However, if these occur over a short space of time, this could indicate that something is not quite right. They might, for example:

- **become withdrawn**, unhappy and secretive
- **spend more time talking on the internet** – often keeping their online activities really private

- **stop doing things they normally enjoy,** like meeting up socially with friends
- **not be as open and communicative** with their parents or carers and other trusted adults
- **start bringing brand new items** such as clothes or a mobile phone into the home – not saying where they came from or providing a credible explanation.

You are best placed to know if your child's behaviour is out of character, trust your instinct and follow up on your concerns.

Positive steps you can take

The best thing you can do to protect your child from grooming is to make them feel safe and supported by coming either to you or another trusted adult, and to contact CEOP if they feel threatened or trapped. They should also feel confident they'll never get into trouble by asking for help.

Explain why you're worried and have regular chats, rather than one 'big talk'. You could perhaps mention a recent age-appropriate news story or TV programme to kick-start a conversation.

Talk openly about all the positive things they're doing online, as well as the risky aspects, and what to expect from a healthy, respectful relationship. Make sure, too, they understand that it's never okay for anyone to pressurise or manipulate them.

Practical ways to help protect your child include the following.

- **Installing parental controls** to filter out adult content from search results.

- **Showing them how to use privacy settings** to stay safe online and identify trusted sources on the internet.

- **Directing them to age-appropriate advice** at thinkuknow.co.uk, themix.org.uk and childline.org.uk.

Report any concerns

If you're worried that your child is being groomed or sexually exploited, contact the police by calling 101 or the NSPCC immediately. Children, parents, carers and teachers can also report concerns about online grooming and sexual abuse to CEOP at ceop.police.uk

Remember – you should always report if your child is or has been in contact with someone who is:

- chatting online to your child about sex and/or asking them to do sexual things on webcam, video chat or live stream
- arranging to meet up face-to-face if they've only met online
- requesting sexual pictures and/or forcing them into sexual activity.

For more information about keeping children safe from grooming and sexual abuse online, visit thinkuknow.co.uk/parents.

The UK Safer Internet Centre at saferinternet.org.uk also supports parents/carers, teachers and professionals, as well as children and young people, in using the internet positively and safely.