

Awareness of Online Grooming Techniques Can Help Protect Students

Educators and parents are often cautioned about the risk of online predators, but little is ever said about how predators build trust with their victims. The process is called “grooming.” In recent years, this term has been used to refer to actions deliberately undertaken to befriend children with the intent to harm them. Perpetrators establish an emotional connection with a child to lower the child’s inhibitions.

To help protect students, adults can educate themselves about the communication methods students use online. Students today are using chat rooms, social networking Web sites, and instant messaging programs to stay connected with friends and family. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for sexual predators to use these same services to establish communication with children and teenagers.

According to Netsmartz411, which is sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, grooming often involves deception of some sort. Adults trying to groom children may lie about their age, even after forming an established relationship. Groomers may also claim to have similar interests and pretend to be knowledgeable about pop culture, modern trends, and the child’s hobbies. The groomer will often try to relate to the child as if nobody else can understand their personal situation as well as the groomer does. Groomers may use explicit conversations to test boundaries and raise the threshold of emotional intimacy as an online relationship develops.

If the ultimate goal of a groomer is to meet with a child in-person, they will often use certain methods to build a child’s trust. Offenders will entice a child into a face-to-face meeting by:

- ▶ Exploiting a child’s natural curiosity about certain topics, such as sex.
- ▶ Lowering the child’s inhibitions by gradually introducing explicit images and child pornography.
- ▶ Using his or her adult status to influence and control a child’s behavior.
- ▶ Offering attention and affection.
- ▶ Relating to emotions and affirming the child’s feelings.
- ▶ Flattering and complimenting the child excessively.

Netsmartz411 provides the following warning signs for adults. A child may be a victim of online grooming if he or she:

- ▶ Obsesses about computer access and becomes angry when he or she cannot get on the computer.
- ▶ Minimizes the screen, or turns off the computer when adults are nearby.
- ▶ Receives gifts from strangers.
- ▶ Receives or makes many phone calls to unrecognized numbers.
- ▶ Becomes withdrawn from family and friends.



Understanding Internet culture can help educators and parents/sponsors recognize the warning signs of online grooming. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children recommends that adults who suspect a child is being groomed by someone online, contact their CyberTipline at www.cybertipline.com. For more information about online grooming, visit Netsmartz411 at www.netsmartz411.org. ■