



The Children's Assessment Center

GROOMING: THE PROCESS OF VICTIMIZATION

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At The Children's Assessment Center, we struggle with the problem of sexual victimization of children every day. Because we work on this problem day in and day out we have learned a tremendous amount about how and why this victimization occurs. Unfortunately we have also learned that we, as a society, are not doing a very good job of attempting to prevent this victimization of our most vulnerable citizens. Prevention is a process of both understanding and education. It is vital that we understand the steps perpetrators take to engage children in sexual acts and then equally as vital that we teach our children what to look out for and how to recognize signs of this inappropriate engagement.

These steps, or the process of victimization of children, are often referred to as **grooming**.

Grooming is:

- when an offender "makes friends with" or engages the child with whom he or she wants to engage in sexual behavior
- when the offender gradually engages the child in sexual behaviors, often through a process of play
- when the offender uses tools to keep the child from telling about the abuse

Offenders engage children in a variety of ways. They make them feel special, give them gifts or money that other children don't get, give them special privileges, play games with them, wrestle with them, emotionally manipulate them (act hurt or disappointed in the child), or scare them into doing what the offender wants them to do. This process of engaging children works because children have strong natural instincts to trust adults, to obey adults, to play and to avoid tattling or getting others into trouble. Children also greatly enjoy special attention or privileges. Additionally, they fear "getting into trouble" and do not want adults to "be mad" at them.

Unfortunately, sexual offenders know all of this about children. They know and understand children and they are experts in exploiting children's natural instincts and vulnerabilities. My husband once compared this grooming process to a turkey hunt. He explained that turkey hunters know a lot about turkeys. They know that turkeys have excellent eyesight, are very suspicious of differences in the environment and have a strong mating instinct. So turkey hunters take great

care to camouflage themselves and to blend into the turkey's natural environment. This reduces the turkey's natural fear and reduces the turkey's sense of risk in the environment. They then use calls that sound like female turkeys to lure the turkey into shot range. They both reduce the turkey's natural instinct to survive by disguising a risk in their environment and then they use their instinct to procreate against them. In the same way, the offender disguises him/herself as a trusted member of the child's "safe environment." He/she may be or become a member of the family, a scout, school or church leader or any other person that the child does not associate with risk. He/she then uses the child's natural instincts to be loved, to play and to please adults in order to gradually engage the child. When the line is crossed and the adult begins to perform sexual acts with the child, the child is often so far into the relationship that it is too hard for them to tell anyone about what is going on.

This is perhaps the biggest tragedy of grooming. It works and it keeps children from telling. In therapy we have heard directly from children all of the reasons that grooming works. They have told us that they did not tell because the offender used any of the following tricks:

"If you tell, I will say it was your fault."

"If you tell, you will go to foster care and we will never see you again."

"If you tell, your mom will be really mad at you."

"If you tell, I will go to jail and it will be your fault."

"If you tell, I will lose my job and we will all be homeless."

"If you tell I will say you started this and they will believe me."

"If you tell, I will spank you."

"If you tell, I will kill your dog."

"You know you wanted me to do this or I would never have done it."

"You liked every minute of this."

"You will do this again if you want to go to that dance."

"You know that I can keep you mother from grounding you."

Sometimes, the offender does not need to say anything at all. The child just knows that things will get worse if the secret is told. Frequently young children do not even realize that these behaviors should not be happening. Often, they first realize this when they see a school program or have a class discussion on safety. Then the sickening realization comes over them that they have been victimized and they don't know how to stop it.

In therapy we talk with the children openly about the grooming process. We backtrack with them to allow them to identify the "tricks" that their offender used to engage them in sexual abuse and

silence. This is a powerful way for them to see that it was not their fault, that someone bigger, stronger, and smarter than they are tricked them. It is also often heartbreaking for them to realize that the person they trusted was intending to hurt them all along.

Now that we understand the grooming process we are still left with the other half of the prevention solution - how to educate our children to recognize the signs. This is a more difficult task I am afraid. I have been frequently heard to proclaim that Sesame Street, Mr. Rodgers and even the Teletubbies all need to have programs on this exact topic. Every child needs to be taught about the private places on their own and others' bodies and the ways in which someone might trick them into allowing those places to be touched. They need to be taught that their caregivers or their doctors sometimes have to touch their private parts when they are sick, hurt or just need help. But it is never a secret or a game and they are never expected not to tell anyone else about this touching. They need to be taught about good secrets and bad secrets. Of course, people look at me as if I am crazy – “how could we put such a terrible thing on television for little children to see?” But the reality is that sexual abuse is happening everyday to thousands of children in our society. They do not have an even playing field. They do not have a chance against the perpetrators of child sexual abuse because we are afraid to tell them. It is time to change this – let's give our children a chance. Let's teach them about grooming – it is also a process of victimization to which they are all vulnerable, just because they are children.

We need to talk together about why we, as a society, are not taking effective measures to protect our precious children. It is an important dialogue that will hopefully lead us to better prevention of this terrible problem, which robs children of their dignity, self-esteem and trust.