

## GROOMING AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR CONSENT

Submitted by the Child Witness Institute

KEY CONCEPTS	
Child Abuse	Child Sexual Abuse
Grooming	Environmental grooming
Reducing Victim Resistance	Reducing Disclosure
Purpose of Grooming	Methods of Grooming

Grooming has been defined as “patterned behavior designed to increase opportunities for sexual assault, minimise victim resistance or withdrawal, and reduce disclosure or belief.”<sup>1</sup> Grooming involves a complex set of behaviours that can target both the victim and the victim’s environment. The latter, referred to as “environmental grooming,” is the grooming that is directed towards individuals other than the actual victim. In many instances, it is necessary to groom the victim’s environment prior to, during and after the sexual assault to ensure continued access to the victim and to minimise the chances of disclosure. Environmental grooming thus refers to that behaviour of the perpetrator which focuses on manipulating the perceptions of the individuals in the victim’s life.<sup>2</sup> Although grooming is traditionally considered to be the targeting of the victim only, sex offenders often groom other individuals in the victim’s environment, like friends and family. This is done to find victims, reduce the probability of reporting and, if reported, reduce the probability of the victim being believed. An adult’s environment would include, besides friends and family, work, church and interest groups. The more environment of the victim groomed, the greater the chances of success.

In order to access victims, a perpetrator will try to establish himself or herself in the environment of the victim so that both the victim and others in the victim’s life will perceive the association between the perpetrator and the victim to be a positive and valued one. In fact, if this grooming is successful, it will result in the environment actually pushing the victim into an association with the perpetrator.<sup>3</sup> For example, establishing oneself as a skilled dance or music coach will result in parents bringing children to the perpetrator and his or her attention towards the child/adult will be viewed positively. In this way, suspicion is eliminated and the fear of losing the benefits of the association is reinforced by the victim’s environment, which, in turn, contributes to keeping the victim in the abusive relationship. Environmental grooming also makes it extremely difficult for the victim to report out of fear of not being believed, since the victim realises that to go against the popular stream will very likely result in negative consequences for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Tanner, J. and Brake, S. 2013. **Exploring sex offender grooming.** <http://www.kbsolutions.com/grooming.pdf>. Accessed 27 January 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The purpose of grooming is always to overcome resistance, maintain access and minimise the risk of disclosure. However, the frequency, intensity and duration of grooming will vary depending on the type of assault as well as the type of victim. For instance, in a case of power rape, the grooming will take the form of coercion and will be brief, violent and intense. Generally, however, resistance is overcome with the use of a more gradual grooming process. For instance, normalising the sexual abuse is one way of grooming a victim. Convincing a potential victim that everybody else partakes in this activity or that others enjoy it, can persuade the victim to engage in these behaviours that they would otherwise reject<sup>4</sup> (Tanner and Brake 2013). Another form of grooming, often referred to as stepwise progression, involves the perpetrator starting with appropriate behaviour and then moving to inappropriate behaviour to desensitise the victim. Some victims are persuaded to engage in unwanted or uncomfortable behaviours because of their desire to maintain the relationship with the perpetrator.

There are three primary goals in grooming the environment of an adult victim:

- to gain access to potential victims by joining social circles (affiliate); and
- to get the environment to accept the perpetrator (accept)
- to generate disbelief about offending behaviour within the environment (assure).

In this way the environment repeatedly supports the relationship and diminishes the ability of the victim to escape or be believed. The offender wants to be in a position to engage the potential victim without generating suspicion. The relationship needs to be attractive to the victim without being suspicious. The relationship must be attractive to the victim and the perpetrator must persuade the victim that the abusive behaviour is acceptable or should be tolerated before trying to trap the victim into continuing the abusive relationship.<sup>5</sup>

The behaviour on the part of the perpetrator which supports environmental grooming includes position, charm, power and celebrity. Position here refers to the social or personal position of the perpetrator within the environment. Social position comes from the occupation or role that the perpetrator has within that environment. Respected social positions tend to offer some immunity from suspicion, like police officers, members of the clergy, social workers etc, since these positions are held in high regard and it is more difficult to accept that they would be involved in perpetrating abuse. Personal position refers to the status acquired by someone from their deeds or accomplishments. Therefore, somebody who assists people in the community or champions the rights of the people tends to gain trust and is less likely to be suspected of inappropriate behaviour. The personality and charm of the perpetrator is an important factor in environmental grooming. A person who is warm and has good verbal and listening skills will be well liked and people will be less likely to believe that they would do something like that.<sup>6</sup>

Power is the third factor in environmental grooming and is actively used by offenders to prevent any questioning of their behaviour. Power gains its influence through authority, deference or respect for the position and can be used to mask inappropriate behaviour or

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

minimise the willingness of the environment to raise a concern, making victims afraid of confrontation. Power also includes fiscal power since a person who has control of the money has the ability to suppress any issues relating to their behaviour. The power to give or not give money provides the perpetrator with significant control over the victim. Power also includes the ability to control others through fear by using physical or tyrannical might. This intimidation and resulting fear can prevent the environment from acting on or even acknowledging that abuse is taking place.<sup>7</sup>

Celebrity is the fourth factor in environmental grooming. People like to be associated with celebrities and like the secondary status that is derived from this access. People who are stars in music, movies and television have immense power and followers will ignore or minimise any wrongdoing to ensure continued access to these people and the status they derive from these people.<sup>8</sup>

The process of grooming has 4 components, which are summarised as follows:

- building a special bond with the victim: the perpetrator tries to become a special friend who is the centre of the victim's support system, and finds a vulnerability in the victim that lends itself to manipulation. This could be a need to escape poverty or a hunger for an opportunity. The perpetrator will offer them a chance to escape or acquire their dream and ensure increasing reliance on him, which creates a dependent role between the victim and the offender.
- causing the victim to rely on the offender: the perpetrator will aim to increase the isolation of the victim from other support, which will increase the need for the victim to have the perpetrator in his or her life. This can be done by keeping a victim trapped in a house, controlling their finances, and removing family and friends.
- reducing the victim's resistance to offensive behaviour: the perpetrator uses various techniques to get a victim to expand his or her boundaries of sexual behaviour. Victims can be trained to perform previously unwanted sexual activities in a short period of time by a skilful offender, most often by rationalising or normalising the behaviour. Victims can also be forced to partake in new behaviours through fear of the offender's power. Victims often submit to abuse out of fear of invoking the perpetrator's anger, being unable to survive without the financial support of the perpetrator or the emotional connection with the latter.
- keeping the adult in the victimising role for as long as possible: this is achieved through two primary means: a sense of hopelessness and feelings of guilt or fear. The isolation of the victim, achieved above, limits their ability to seek assistance and generates a sense of hopelessness. Victims are led to believe that there is no chance of life without the perpetrator or that life will be much worse for them without him. The guilt and fear relate to the fact that victims generally know or suspect that they are being abused and the perpetrator uses this to make them believe that they want or enjoy the abuse. Victims also struggle with the fact that others will find out what

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

has happened, and they will be judged negatively for this. These feelings of fear and guilt intensify the hopelessness felt by the victim.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*