ONLINE GROOMING OF CHILDREN

Submitted by the Child Witness Institute

KEY CONCEPTS	
Online grooming	Sexual exploitation of children
Adolescents	Stages of grooming
Online behaviour	

This is a summary of article on a blog written by Eva Veldhuizen- Ochodničanová entitled *The new "Stranger Danger": Tactics used in the online grooming of children*
https://icmec.org.au/blog/the-new-stranger-danger-tactics-used-in-the-online-grooming-of-children/

There are certain features of the internet that are particularly conducive to the behaviour of child sex offenders. It increases accessibility to children while ensuring anonymity and offers protection from being detected by law enforcement. This has enabled offenders to develop new ways of sexually exploiting children, which include:

- production, possession, and distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM)
- live streaming of child sexual abuse
- sexual extortion
- harassment of children
- sharing of self-generated sexual content involving children
- unwanted exposure of a child to sexual content.

In order to exploit a child sexually online, it is necessary for the offender to build a relationship with the child which will enable them to encourage the child to engage in sexually explicit conversations, share explicit photographs and videos, or meet up with the offender in person. The primary focus is to ensure that the child does not reveal that abuse is taking place. These behaviours are referred to as online sexual grooming.

Although each individual case of online sexual grooming is unique and the tactics employed by the offender vary, certain similarities have been identified in the patterns that offenders engage in to perpetrate child sexual exploitation online.

Most online grooming models have identified 5 stages, which makes it easier to recognise and identify the grooming process. The 5 stages presented here are based on Winters and Jeglic's Sexual Grooming Model, which was adapted for an online context utilizing pre-existing models of online sexual grooming.

Stage 1: Victim Selection
The first stage of online grooming involves a risk assessment undertaken by the offender. They will find out information about the personal characteristics of the child as well as the online and offline environments surrounding the child. Children who are particularly vulnerable to online grooming often share similar characteristics and personal situations including low self-esteem, difficult family circumstances, and a lack of supervision on the internet.

Stage 2: Access and isolation

Once the offender has identified a particular child and gained access to them, the grooming will begin.

The offender will engage the child in conversation, and attempt to establish a relationship, seeking further information to ensure privacy, so will ask questions about where the child access the internet (alone in their bedroom, for instance) or what parents' schedules are. They then begin to isolate the child, getting the child to believe that their relationship with the child is very special ("If nobody will talk to you sweetheart, you can talk to me … I'm a good guy."). The offender uses manipulation to place themselves at the centre of the child's world. They encourage the victim to hide their relationship from their families.

Stage 3: Trust development

This is the point where the offender develops a trusting friendship and relationship with the victim. This can be done in a variety of ways:

- **praising** the child for their maturity and intelligence ("You're a cutie, you sure you're only 12? Looking all cool and cute and grown up.")
- encouraging the child to disclose **personal information**
- syncing their **language** with that of the child
- highlighting **mutuality** (i.e., similar interests, attitudes and behaviours between the offender and child)
- **portraying** themselves as being trustworthy and nice ("I wudnt hurt you, but there r alotta weirdos out there, but im not one of them…. If you EVER decide to meet someone, please be very very careful.").

Stage 4: Desensitization

Once the trusting relationship has been developed, the offender will slowly start to introduce sexual content into the conversation, increasing in intensity over time ("Have you ever done anything sexual … with a guy or a girl"). The exact nature of this content differs, but can include both implicit and explicit sexual conversations, the introduction of sexual content as a game, or the offering of sexual advice. Escalation may include the sending and receiving of nude images or videos, livestreaming sexual content, as well as arranging for in-person sexual encounters.

Stage 5: Post-abuse maintenance

The purpose of the final stage is to ensure that the child remains trapped in the cycle of abuse. This is accomplished by reinforcing and maintaining trust so that the child does not disclose, or by threatening or blackmailing the child. Trust is reinforced by, for instance, giving the child affection, praise or encouragement for their actions i.e.

- "Because you are underage. Your dad would kill us both I guess, so we're in this together."
- "You can't say anything ok […] please promise me ok [….] we'd be in trouble together."