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Understanding grooming

Grooming behaviour and the steps to sexual offending

The following material is prepared to help answer common questions that arise regarding sexual abuse in general and Grooming behaviour specifically.

It is provided to provide understanding and assistance when responding to detailed reports of allegations relating to sexual abuse and offending.

FAQs about Grooming

What is Grooming?

It is essential to understand that Grooming is a stage in the child sexual abuse process. In other words, grooming is undertaken to commence abuse and not undertaken as an 'end behaviour'. Rather, Grooming is the first behaviour exhibited by offenders in the process of proceeding to commencement of abuse. Unless external circumstances prevent the sexual abuse occurring (such as being caught by another person, or physically removed from the relationship with the child) grooming will always lead to abuse.

Why has the Victorian Government legislated to make Grooming a crime?

This is best answered by a report that was significant in the creation of the legislation from December 2013 titled '*Child Grooming: "Offending all the way through from the start" - Exploring the call for law reform*' [report prepared by Trisha Randhawa, Legal Researcher, & Scott Jacobs, Research, Media, & Advocacy Manager, Child Wise, December 2013].

Quoting from page 4: "The grooming of a child is a preparatory act essential to the subsequent crime of child sexual abuse – it is critical to recognise that the two elements are inextricably linked. Only through realising the importance of grooming as a stage in the sexual abuse of a child can effective interventions and preventative measures be implemented."

Essentially, the act of grooming is so closely associated to sexual abuse that it was considered to be an integral part of offending and should therefore be prohibited.

Over what timeframe does Grooming occur?

Quoting from page 6 of the previously referenced Child Wise report: "When child sexual abuse is perpetrated, it almost never occurs without warning. Most cases of child sexual abuse are the result of months or even years of preparatory grooming of the victim. Child sex offenders identify a target

and spend time developing a trusting relationship with the child and their parents or carers. The act of grooming a child for sexual abuse is rarely obvious, but there are signs that can identify grooming behaviours, and lead to an early intervention.”

Also, from page 19: “The grooming process can often occur over extended periods of time. Child Wise has knowledge of child sex offenders that have accessed families with children who are 10 years old, because they have a preference for 12-13 year old children. These committed paedophiles are willing to build a trusting relationship with families over years (often with multiple targets at one time), because it helps to put their grooming behaviour beyond all doubt. However, it often occurs in a much shorter time span, dependant on the skill and experience of the offender.”

In summary, Grooming is an incremental process that can be short or can span a long period of time. In either case the intent, and the result, of the behaviour is that those in close contact with the Grooming behaviour are less likely to recognise the behaviour as leading to abuse. The explicit purpose of the behaviour is to prevent this type of recognition from occurring.

What is the purpose of Grooming?

Quoting from page 10 of 2013 report titled *Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Sexual Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations*: “The term ‘grooming’ refers to actions deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and influencing a child, and in some circumstances members of the child’s family, for the purpose of sexual activity with the child. These actions are designed to establish an emotional connection in order to lower the child’s inhibitions and gain access to the intended victim. In this respect grooming involves psychological manipulation that is usually very subtle, drawn out, calculated, controlling and premeditated”

Again, from page 11 of the Child Wise report: “Grooming is an insidious process that can be difficult to recognise or distinguish from seemingly innocuous actions. It has two main elements:

- Building a trusting relationship with the child and his/her carers, and
- Isolating the child in order to abuse them. “

The purpose of Grooming is to prepare the ground for sexual abuse to occur.

How can Grooming be identified?

From page 19-20 of the Child Wise report: “People intent on grooming children for sexual abuse are commonly charming and helpful, have insider status, and often go on the offensive when behaviour is challenged. Worrying behaviours that may be grooming include:

- Peer-like play with children
- Preference for the company of children
- Engagement in ‘roughhousing’ and tickling
- Touching games
- Failing to honour clear boundaries of behaviour
- Seeking one-on-one contact with children.”

As previously noted, these behaviours individually or in isolated instances may appear innocuous. As an ongoing pattern, however, they may indicate that grooming is occurring.

Understanding Grooming in more detail

The Finkelhor Model

This model is used the world over to understand the process from grooming to offending.

[Originally published at www.forensicpsychology.co.uk]

“A model of offending behaviour is a ‘conceptual framework’ or ‘way of thinking’ about an offence. Models are useful as they ensure completeness of assessment by directing the assessor to areas which may ordinarily be omitted.

Finkelhor (1984), devised the following model of sexual abuse (offending) which, although primarily applied to sexual offences, can in fact be applied to any offence against the person.

Finkelhor describes his model as the ‘Four Preconditions of Abuse’ and as such it outlines the four conditions which are necessarily present for a sexual offence to take place. The model is composed of the following four stages:

The Four Pre-Conditions of Abuse.

1. The Thinking Stage.
2. Overcoming Internal Inhibitions or ‘Giving Permission’.
3. Overcoming External Inhibitions or ‘Creating the Opportunity’.
4. Overcoming the Victim’s Resistance.” See page 4

Accepted Assumptions

The following internationally accepted assumptions about sexual offending and sex offenders, apply to understanding the Finkelhor model. These assumptions have been formulated on the basis of decades of international research and statistics regarding sex offenders, including longitudinal studies and in-depth interviews and profiling of sex offenders. Note that the theoretical basis for these assumptions can be read in more detail in the general literature about sexual offending.

Accepted Assumptions about Sex Offenders

1. They will have committed far more offences than convicted of.
2. Convicted offences will represent the ‘tip of the iceberg’.
3. All offences are premeditated.
4. The role of fantasy and masturbation is central.
5. The offender will try to deny all/some of the offence by denial, e.g., justification, distortion, minimisation.
6. They will seek to lay the responsibility for the offence elsewhere.
7. They will say that the offence is ‘out of character’.
8. They will have built up an addictive cycle of behaviour.
9. The offender will say ‘I won’t do it again’.
10. There is no cure, only control.

What Grooming involves

The Groomer undertakes **grooming the environment** in which the child lives. This means the groomer works to groom not only the child, but the child's carers and also create an environment in which grooming can be achieved.

[The following information is from 'Exploring Sex Offender Grooming' by Jim Tanner, PhD and Stephen Brake, PhD, originally published at <http://www.kbsolutions.com/Grooming.pdf>]

"Finding victims involves establishing oneself in the victim's environment such that both the victim and the others in the victim's life see the association between the offender and the victim as positive and valued. In fact, successful environmental grooming results in the environment actually pushing the victim into association with the perpetrator. For example, establishing oneself as a skilled soccer coach in a community league will result in parents actively seeking to place their children under the offender's tutelage. Increased attention of the offender towards the victim will be viewed positively rather than with suspicion.

Establishing a valued position in the victim's environment also reduces the probability of offenses being reported. This will be explained in detail below, but essentially the value derived by the environment through the victim's association with the offender makes it difficult for the victim to report assaults. The fear of losing the benefits of the association is reinforced by the victim's environment and works to keep the victim in the abusive relationship.

Environmental grooming also makes it difficult for the victim to report out of fear of not being believed. Victims understand that reporting behavior antithetical to the collective perception of others is less likely to be heard or accepted and can result in negative consequences for the victim."

Page 2-3

"Goals of Grooming A Child's Environment

There are three primary goals in grooming a child's environment:

- access, gaining and maintaining access to potential victims,
- allure, making the environment interested in or at least accepting of the offender's relationship with the child, and
- alibi, promoting a believable rationale for the offender's contact with the child." Page 4

1) The next step is to **groom the victim**.

"Potential victims are groomed prior to an assault. While the frequency, intensity and duration of grooming varies across assault types, the purpose of victim grooming is always threefold:

- a) overcome resistance
- b) maintain access
- c) minimize disclosure

Stepwise progression to assault is another way of grooming a victim. Starting with appropriate behavior and systematically moving to inappropriate behavior desensitizes victims to assault...

A second purpose of victim grooming is to maintain access to the victim. It is time consuming to groom a victim and the offender wants to keep the victim available. Systematic steps are taken to keep the victim engaged with the offender and to keep the victim submitting to the assaults. These steps are covered in the next sections.

The third purpose of victim grooming is to reduce the probability that the victim will disclose or report the assaults.” Page 2, 4.

2) Next the Groomer needs to **Create an ‘alibi’**:

Groomers establish an alibi for how their relationship with the child develops and also for the ‘alone time’ they create with the child. They do this by:

“First, and foremost, establishing a believable reason to interact with children under less supervised situations....Second, establishing rationale for isolated individual attention... Third, promoting a believable reason for behavior that might otherwise be questioned.

Children are not stupid, and will easily pick up on and understand the regard their environment holds for the offender if (s)he has properly groomed the environment. This provides impetus for keeping the child from reporting uncomfortable behaviors on the part of the offender. Moreover, by building a reasonable explanation of their behavior with the child, the offender increases the chance the environment will believe that rationale rather than believe the offender is engaging in illicit behavior if the child does report. In some cases alibi is generated by fear. The environment is willing to excuse or ignore behavior if it fears reprisals for raising the issue (their child being thrown off a team or out of a group, for example).” Page 5

US guidance on the behaviours that indicate sexual grooming by an adult to a child

[The following information was originally published at the US Dept of Justice dedicated website for information regarding sex offenders:

<http://www.nsopw.gov/en/Education/CommonQuestions?#answer-07>

“It usually begins with subtle behaviour that may not initially appear to be inappropriate, such as paying a lot of attention to the child or being very affectionate. Many victims of grooming and sexual abuse do not recognize they are being manipulated, nor do they realize how grooming is a part of the abuse process.

- An adult seems overly interested in a child.
- An adult frequently initiates or creates opportunities to be alone with a child (or multiple children).
- An adult becomes fixated on a child.
- An adult gives special privileges to a child (e.g., rides to and from practices, etc.).
- An adult befriends a family and shows more interest in building a relationship with the child than with the adults
- An adult displays favouritism towards one child within a family.
- An adult finds opportunities to buy a child gifts.
- An adult caters to the interests of the child, so a child or the parent may initiate contact with the offender.
- An adult who displays age and gender preferences.

Grooming is a method of building trust with a child and adults around the child in an effort to gain access to and time alone with her/him. However, in extreme cases, offenders may use threats and

physical force to sexually assault or abuse a child. More common, though, are subtle approaches designed to build relationships with families. The offender may assume a caring role, befriend the child, or even exploit their position of trust and authority to groom the child and/or the child's family. These individuals intentionally build relationships with the adults around a child or seek out a child who may have fewer adults in her/his life. This increases the likelihood that the offender's time with the child is welcomed and encouraged.

The purpose of grooming is:

- To reduce the likelihood of a disclosure.
- To reduce the likelihood of the child being believed.
- To reduce the likelihood of being detected.
- To manipulate the perceptions of other adults around the child.
- To manipulate the child into becoming a cooperating participant which reduces the likelihood of a disclosure and increases the likelihood that the child will repeatedly return to the offender."

Does Grooming always lead to sexual abuse?

The answer is yes, unless an external circumstance prevents this, for example:

- The Groomer is caught grooming
- The Groomer senses the child is becoming distrustful or resistant to the grooming tactics, leading to the Groomer moving towards another child (although the Groomer may still attempt to "win back" the child)
- The Groomer assesses that they are at risk of being discovered as a sexual Groomer by either the child's carer(s) or another party
- The child of their own volition either avoids the Groomer or refuses to spend time with them

Other information about grooming behaviour:

[The following was originally published at: www.casac.org.au and www.forensicpsychology.co.uk]

- Groomers show an inappropriate interest in a child's sexual development
- Groomers often look for children that have been sexually abused in the past and "reaching out to them" – they might use this past experience as a way of "helping" the child, telling the child he/she can talk to the groomer about this rather than their parents
- Groomers want to share secrets with or know secrets kept by the child
- Socialising physical touch between Groomer and child by beginning with hugs, kisses, physical touch that begins by being socially appropriate but increases in prevalence and duration. Moving to "accidental" sexual touch commonly through tickling, wrestling and rough play.
- Groomers have inappropriate, intrusive or "pushy" interest in the child's sexual development, and in the case of previously abused children, history
- Offences against children are also committed within the context of a carefully prepared opportunity. Occasionally, lone children are attacked by a stranger but, more commonly, the scene is carefully staged. Again, offences against children are more commonly committed by someone known to the victim, such as a relative, sports coach or someone who has 'befriended' a family. The opportunity is created by, over time, the perpetrator placing themselves in a position of trust. This means that the perpetrator can be alone with the child and can also exercise a degree of authority. Again, offenders may go to great lengths to create the opportunity such as training in a particular occupation, doing voluntary work and so on.

- Groomers may have more than one child they are grooming. Groomers may target children in larger families especially as the child may welcome special one-to-one attention. Groomers also may target children from single mother families in order to find a child who might be grateful for attention from another adult who seeks to fill a parental gap in the child's life.