

# Unseen Forces:

## Manipulation, Grooming, and the Gradual Desensitization to Sexual Abuse in Adolescents

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## Introduction

In cases of child sexual abuse, particularly those involving adolescents, one of the most complex dynamics is the manipulation (or grooming) behaviors exhibited by the alleged offenders. The term “grooming” has been used for decades to describe the deliberate process through which an abuser manipulates and desensitizes their victim by building trust with a child or adolescent to establish control and facilitate future exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

For adolescents, the line between manipulation and genuine affection can often become blurred, especially when they perceive themselves as being in a consensual, romantic, or emotionally fulfilling relationship with the offender.

Understanding the psychological tactics involved in grooming and manipulation is critical for professionals across disciplines—social workers, law enforcement, mental health experts, medical providers, forensic interviewers, the courts, advocates, and educators—who work to identify, intervene, and support young people caught in these abusive dynamics. This publication explores these behaviors in depth, offering practical insights and strategies for recognizing and addressing grooming in adolescent abuse cases.

## Understanding Manipulation and Grooming in Child Abuse

Grooming refers to the gradual process by which an offender builds trust and emotional connection with a child or adolescent to facilitate future exploitation or abuse.<sup>2</sup> The manipulative behaviors

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia M. Winters, Leah E. Kaylor & Elizabeth L. Jeglic (2021): Toward a Universal Definition of Child Sexual Grooming, *Deviant Behavior*, DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2021.1941427

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

employed by offenders often distort the adolescent's perception of what constitutes appropriate behavior in a relationship, leaving them vulnerable to the offender's control. The manipulation and emotional control exerted during grooming can deeply affect an adolescent's sense of self-worth, complicating their ability to recognize abuse when it occurs.

## The Five Stages of Grooming

The process of grooming is often described in five distinct stages.<sup>3</sup> While these stages may overlap or vary slightly depending on the situation, they generally follow a predictable pattern. Each stage represents a calculated step taken by the offender to lower the adolescent's defenses and gradually introduce abusive behaviors into the relationship, while maintaining secrecy.

### 1. *Victim Selection*

The first stage of grooming involves identifying and selecting a victim. Offenders often look for children or adolescents who are vulnerable due to factors such as emotional isolation, low self-esteem, or a lack of strong support systems.<sup>4</sup> An offender may choose a target who is particularly susceptible to emotional manipulation or has difficulty recognizing inappropriate behavior. Offenders may also select a victim based on attraction or opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

**Example:** A 16-year-old adolescent, struggling with feelings of loneliness and low self-worth after the recent divorce of their parents, is approached by a trusted adult (e.g., a coach, mentor, or family friend) who offers them attention and emotional support.

### 2. *Access Establishment*

Once the offender has identified their target, they begin to establish access to the child, and in some cases, isolate them. Ways offenders may gain access to their victims include seeking employment in youth-serving positions, spending time at places frequented by youth, or manipulating the child's family.<sup>6</sup>

**Example:** An alleged offender may recognize a single parent struggling to get their kids to and from sports practice. The offender may offer to assist the parent with transportation, taking the burden off the parent, while simultaneously getting the child alone.

### 3. *Trust Development*

In this stage, the offender continues to manipulate the adolescent by providing what they perceive as unmet needs. This may involve giving gifts, providing material support, or offering a sense of purpose or excitement that the adolescent might not get elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Georgia M. Winters & Elizabeth L. Jeglic, "Stages of Sexual Grooming: Recognizing Potentially Predatory Behaviors of Child Molesters," *Deviant Behavior* 38, no. 6 (2017): 724-733. DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2016.1197656.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

The perpetrator often makes the adolescent feel special, unique, or chosen, increasing their emotional attachment. They often position themselves as someone who truly understands the victim, offering a sense of validation and emotional closeness that may be missing from the adolescent's life.

This stage is critical because it sets the foundation for the victim's emotional dependence on the abuser. During this stage, victims may begin to defend their abuser, rationalizing inappropriate behavior and pushing away external concerns or interventions. The youth may fight to keep the abuser in their life, feeling an emotional bond that clouds their judgment, due to the manipulative tactics of the perpetrator. The adolescent may not fully recognize the harm being done, instead focusing on the rewards of attention, validation, and a sense of belonging, which the abuser has expertly cultivated.

**Example:** An alleged offender may offer the adolescent expensive gifts, take them out to special events, or provide them with a sense of exclusivity that reinforces the notion of a "special" relationship.

#### **4. *Desensitization to Physical Contact and Sexual Content***

The final stage of grooming often involves gradually introducing inappropriate sexual behaviors or conversations.<sup>8</sup>The offender may begin with subtle sexual comments or gestures, testing the adolescent's boundaries. Over time, the behaviors escalate, with the offender normalizing these actions and convincing the adolescent that what is happening is "natural" or "mutual." In some cases, the adolescent may be manipulated into believing that they are complicit in the abuse, particularly if they have been led to view the relationship as consensual or romantic.

**Example:** The offender may begin making sexual jokes or comments to gauge the adolescent's reaction. This might escalate to physical contact, such as inappropriate touching or kissing, which the offender downplays as normal expressions of affection or intimacy.

#### **5. *Maintenance Following the Abuse***

Once the abuse has begun, the offender will employ strategies to maintain access to the victim, while also maintaining their secrecy.<sup>9</sup> Offenders who manipulate will often use a combination of tactics such as lies, threats, violence, bribes, rewards, love and affection to maintain access to their victim, while evading detection for their behavior.

**Example:** An alleged offender may tell an adolescent that no one else will ever love them the way the offender does.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Georgia M. Winters, Leah E. Kaylor & Elizabeth L. Jeglic, "Toward a Universal Definition of Child Sexual Grooming," *Deviant Behavior* (2021), DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2021.1941427.

## The Complexity of Manipulation in Adolescent Cases

One of the most challenging aspects of grooming in adolescent cases is the potential for the victim to perceive the relationship as consensual. Adolescents, particularly those in the midst of identity formation<sup>10</sup> and emotional development, may experience strong attachments to the alleged offender, especially when the abuser has carefully nurtured their feelings of affection and self-worth. An adolescent may genuinely believe that they are in a romantic relationship, not recognizing the manipulative tactics employed by the offender to gain power and control.

These tactics can make it difficult for adolescents to recognize or report the abuse, as they may perceive the relationship as consensual or confusing. The inconsistency of age of consent laws across states further complicates this dynamic, as varying legal thresholds can lead to confusion about what constitutes illegal behavior. In some jurisdictions, the age of consent may be lower, making it harder for teens to fully grasp the boundaries of acceptable relationships, particularly when manipulative perpetrators exploit these legal gray areas to justify their actions. This uncertainty may cloud the adolescent's understanding of their situation, as they might not realize they are being victimized until much later, if at all.

In such cases, professionals must approach the situation with sensitivity, understanding that the adolescent's perception of the relationship is clouded by the abuser's manipulation. Educational programs for youth that focus on healthy relationships and recognizing grooming behaviors, as well as training for professionals to identify the signs of grooming, are critical in breaking the cycle of abuse and supporting victims in recognizing and escaping these manipulative dynamics.

Understanding the stages of grooming allows professionals to better identify the warning signs early and intervene before the situation escalates. Recognizing that grooming is often a slow and methodical process, involving emotional manipulation and isolation, can help multidisciplinary teams provide the necessary support and intervention for victims. For support professionals, recognizing these patterns ensures they provide sensitive and effective care, helping victims process their experiences. Investigative professionals, on the other hand, must understand these techniques to effectively identify, gather evidence, and interview victims in a way that acknowledges the psychological manipulation involved, leading to stronger cases and improved outcomes for survivors.

## Red Flag Grooming Behaviors

Grooming behaviors are much easier to recognize in hindsight, as many of the actions involved initially appear innocent or harmless. For example, a perpetrator may offer a teenager special attention or gifts, which might be misinterpreted as acts of kindness rather than manipulation. However, certain behaviors are more commonly associated with grooming for sexual abuse than with non-abusive adult-adolescent relationships.<sup>11</sup> These include attempts to isolate the adolescent from

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<sup>10</sup> **Identity Formation:** exploring various aspects of one's identity, such as gender, cultural background, social relationships, career aspirations, and personal values. This exploration is influenced by internal factors, like personal experiences and introspection, as well as external factors, such as family, peers, society, and culture. Successfully forming a stable identity contributes to an individual's sense of self-confidence, purpose, and psychological well-being.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth L. Jeglic, Georgia M. Winters & Brandy N. Johnson, "Identification of Red Flag Child Sexual Grooming Behaviors," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 133 (2023): 105998, DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105998.

family or friends, creating secrecy around their interactions, and gradually escalating physical contact, such as touching or making sexual comments disguised as jokes.<sup>12</sup>

While positive adult-adolescent relationships may involve mentorship or guidance, grooming typically features a pattern of emotional manipulation, where the perpetrator seeks to blur boundaries, control the adolescent's actions, and create an environment of dependency. These behaviors may seem benign in isolation but, when considered together, they often point to the intentional manipulation of the adolescent for exploitative purposes. Recognizing these subtle patterns early can be challenging, but understanding the dynamics involved helps distinguish between healthy adult-adolescent relationships and those that are abusive.

Researchers Jeglic, Winters, and Johnson have identified behaviors that are more likely to occur in cases of child sexual abuse than in non-abusive relationships<sup>13</sup>. These behaviors are categorized into three risk levels: Enhanced Risk, Moderate Risk, and High Risk.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Enhanced Risk Behaviors***

Enhanced Risk behaviors are 1.68 to 3.46 times more likely to occur in cases of sexual abuse, than in non-abusive relationships.<sup>15</sup> These behaviors include an adult spending time alone with the young person, giving excessive one-on-one attention, telling the youth they are special or loved, showing favoritism, offering rewards, and taking the youth on overnight trips.<sup>16</sup> Enhanced Risk traits in the adolescent may include isolation, feelings of being unwanted or unloved, a neediness for attention, and psychological or behavioral difficulties.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Moderate Risk Behaviors***

Moderate Risk behaviors are 3.47 to 6.7 times more likely to occur in cases of sexual abuse than in non-abusive relationships.<sup>18</sup> These behaviors include the offender engaging the youth in sexually explicit conversations, sometimes about the youth's own sexual experiences, telling inappropriate jokes, providing sexual education, offering substances such as drugs or alcohol, and establishing relationships with the youth's family.<sup>19</sup> Moderate Risk traits include adolescents that lack adult supervision or close relationships with their caregivers.<sup>20</sup>

### ***High Risk Behaviors***

High Risk behaviors are at least 6.71 times more likely to occur in cases of sexual abuse than in non-abusive relationships.<sup>21</sup> These behaviors include the offender initiating physical contact with the youth in seemingly innocuous ways, then gradually increasing contact with the youth's body. Offenders may expose the youth to sexual content, such as pornography or the offender's own body.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Another key High Risk behavior is the offender's deliberate attempt to isolate the youth from their family or peers.<sup>23</sup>

## Online Sexual Grooming of Adolescents

The rise of digital communication has provided new avenues for perpetrators to engage in online sexual grooming of adolescents. Online grooming involves the same manipulative tactics as in-person grooming but takes place through social media, messaging apps, gaming platforms, and other online spaces. Perpetrators may initially pose as peers or someone younger than their true age<sup>24</sup>, building trust with the adolescent over time through private conversations, compliments, and promises of attention or gifts.

Further, perpetrators can scan online spaces for vulnerable teens who disclose personal struggles, such as mental health conditions or eating disorders, allowing them to quickly connect with victims. This allows the offender to appear as though they instantly know the victim, creating an illusion of a deep emotional connection and heightening the sense of intimacy. This perceived understanding makes the adolescent more vulnerable and allows the manipulative relationship to progress more quickly.

Research shows some offenders of online grooming have broached sexual topics within 30 minutes of conversation.<sup>25</sup> They may also create an illusion of deep emotional connection, gradually lowering the adolescent's defenses and making them more susceptible to exploitation.<sup>26</sup> The anonymity of the internet makes it harder for adolescents to perceive danger, as they may not immediately recognize the cues of grooming that would be more obvious in face-to-face interactions. Online interactions feel less threatening because they are detached from physical presence, leading the adolescent to underestimate the manipulative nature of the relationship.

The gradual escalation of grooming behaviors online—such as sharing personal information, engaging in private conversations, and exchanging sexually suggestive messages—can blur the lines between normal interaction and coercive behavior. For adolescents, especially those struggling with feelings of loneliness or low self-esteem, the attention and validation offered by a manipulative adult may seem rewarding and fulfilling, making it harder for them to recognize the manipulation.<sup>27</sup> Perpetrators may also use threats, such as blackmail or guilt, to maintain control over the adolescent, further complicating their ability to disengage from the situation.

Additionally, parents' reactions to their children's online activity can discourage adolescents from disclosing online victimization. Parents may react with anger or disbelief when they discover their

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Georgia M. Winters, Leah E. Kaylor & Elizabeth L. Jeglic, "Sexual Offenders Contacting Children Online: An Examination of Transcripts of Sexual Grooming," *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 23, no. 1 (2017): 62-76. DOI: 10.1080/13552600.2016.1271146.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Reneses, María Riberas-Gutiérrez & Nereida Bueno-Guerra, "He Flattered Me": A Comprehensive Look into Online Grooming Risk Factors: Merging Voices of Victims, Offenders and Experts through In-depth Interviews," *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 18, no. 4 (2024): Article 3, DOI: 10.5817/CP2024-4-3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

child is interacting with strangers online, even if those interactions are innocent.<sup>28</sup> This anger may be directed toward the offender, or sometimes toward the adolescent. This can create an environment of shame around online behavior, leading adolescents to keep their experiences secret. If a teenager feels that their online behavior will be met with judgment or punishment, they may avoid talking about any uncomfortable or harmful interactions. This reluctance to disclose delays intervention and increases the risk of further manipulation.

## Cultural Dynamics in Grooming and Manipulation of Adolescents

Cultural factors play a significant role in how grooming and manipulation are perceived, experienced, and addressed in adolescent cases. In some cultures, behaviors associated with grooming may be seen in a different light, complicating the identification and intervention in cases of abuse. For instance, in some societies, young people—particularly girls—are married at an early age, which may create an environment where inappropriate relationships with adults are normalized or even expected.<sup>29</sup> In cultures where early marriage is common, perpetrators may exploit societal expectations to manipulate young adolescents. For example, an older individual may justify their actions by referring to cultural norms that permit or encourage early marriage, framing the relationship as acceptable or even desirable. They may present themselves as offering the adolescent a "better future," positioning themselves as a protector or provider within the traditional structure. The adolescent, often already under pressure from family and societal expectations, may feel compelled to comply, thinking this is their only path to acceptance or security. The groomer may use this cultural context to make the adolescent feel obligated, further manipulating their emotions and sense of responsibility.

In some cultures, young girls are taught to defer to the authority of adults, particularly men, in familial and societal structures. Groomers may exploit this dynamic by positioning themselves as figures of power and authority, making it difficult for the adolescent to question their behavior or seek help. When the adolescent tries to confide in others, they may face limited understanding or support due to cultural biases that dismiss concerns of grooming or manipulation as exaggerations or misunderstandings.

In other cultures, there may be strong familial pressure to preserve reputations or avoid shame<sup>30</sup>. In such environments, an adolescent may remain loyal to the abuser to protect the family's honor or to avoid social stigmatization. The abuser may exploit these values, convincing the adolescent that disclosing the relationship would bring disgrace or harm to themselves and to their family.

The complexity of these cultural dynamics makes it more challenging to recognize manipulation. However, it also highlights the critical need for culturally sensitive education and intervention strategies that both acknowledge and challenge harmful norms while providing support for victims in a way that is respectful of their cultural context.

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<sup>28</sup> Dolev-Cohen, M., Yosef, T., & Meiselles, M. (2024). "Parental Responses to Online Sexual Grooming Events Experienced by Their Teenage Children," *European Journal of Investigative Health Psychology and Education* 14, no. 5 (2024): 1311-1324. DOI: 10.3390/ejihpe14050086.

<sup>29</sup> Faisal, F. (2024). "From Trust to Betrayal: Child Grooming in Indonesia's Legal Framework," *The Effectiveness of Law Enforcement and Prevention in Modern Society* 6, no. 3 (2024), DOI: 10.24252/aldev.v6i3.51780.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

## MDT Considerations in Cases of Grooming and Sexual Abuse of Adolescents

In cases of adolescent sexual abuse involving grooming behaviors, it is crucial for a multidisciplinary team (MDT) to collaborate effectively to ensure safety, well-being, and justice for the victim. Each professional discipline involved in the case brings a unique perspective and expertise, which is essential for addressing the complex needs of the adolescent and ensuring a thorough, coordinated response.

### *Social Services*

Social service professionals are tasked with ensuring the safety and support of the adolescent. They assess the immediate safety of the child, make recommendations for out-of-home placements if necessary, and coordinate with other agencies to provide comprehensive care. Social workers should be trained to recognize signs of grooming and manipulation, ensuring the adolescent receives appropriate interventions, such as crisis counseling, safety planning, and referrals to specialized services.

### *Forensic Interviewers*

Forensic interviewers conduct neutral information-gathering interviews with adolescents in a way that is sensitive to their developmental stage and the manipulation they may have experienced. In cases involving grooming, interviewers must be mindful of the subtle, often gradual nature of the perpetrator's tactics. They should employ non-leading, open-ended questions to allow the adolescent to recount their experiences, while avoiding reinforcing any manipulation tactics that may have been used to instill fear or confusion in the victim.

Adolescents may not recognize the manipulation they have experienced, particularly if they have been groomed into perceiving the relationship as romantic or emotionally fulfilling. In these cases, the adolescent may not see themselves as a victim, and their reluctance to disclose abuse can be enhanced by the emotional attachment they feel toward the alleged offender. Forensic interviewers must approach these situations with sensitivity, recognizing the adolescent's perspective and emotional state. Rather than assuming a victim's stance, interviewers must create a safe, non-judgmental space where the adolescent feels heard and validated. By meeting youth where they are, acknowledging their experience, and avoiding leading or accusatory language, forensic interviewers can help adolescents navigate the complex emotions and confusion surrounding the abuse. This neutral approach builds rapport, promotes trust, and increases the likelihood that the adolescent will open up, allowing for a more effective and supportive investigative process.

For specific examples of interview questions that address different stages of grooming and manipulation, see the Appendix: Sample Language for Forensic Interviews.

## **Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement plays a central role in investigating sexual abuse cases. Officers must be trained to recognize the subtle signs of desensitization and the psychological manipulation that often precede sexual abuse. In these cases, it is critical to keep an eye toward corroborative details gathered during the forensic interview, such as manipulative experiences that shed light on the offender's tactics and the victim's emotional state. Law enforcement can use this information to further understand the motivations of the alleged victim and alleged offender, and to inform investigative strategies such as interrogations of the suspect.

Additionally, law enforcement must recognize that the "relationship" between the victim and the perpetrator is often deeply embedded, making it difficult for the victim to break free from the manipulation. This emotional bond can affect both the investigation and interactions with the victim. Officers should avoid demonizing the offender, as this may lead to further alienation of the victim, who may still feel loyal to or dependent on the abuser. Investigators also need to consider that the victim may destroy or withhold evidence to protect the perpetrator, either out of fear, shame, or emotional attachment.

Furthermore, law enforcement must be vigilant during post-detection stages, particularly when it comes to intimidation or coercion. Victims may continue to reach out to the perpetrator or accept communication attempts, even in the face of court-ordered restrictions on contact. This ongoing interaction can complicate the investigation and highlight the lasting effects of grooming and manipulation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for law enforcement to conduct a sensitive, effective investigation and support the victim through the legal process.

## **Courts**

In the courtroom, legal professionals must understand the psychological and emotional dynamics of grooming when assessing the credibility of the adolescent's testimony. Judges, attorneys, and jurors need to understand the complexities of grooming behaviors, recognizing that victims may not immediately recognize their abuse or may struggle to explain it due to manipulation. Legal professionals should ensure that the adolescent is supported throughout the legal process. Prosecutors should consider the use of an Expert Witness to educate the jury on these dynamics.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, some state legislation<sup>32</sup> now allows child sexual grooming to be prosecuted as a standalone offense, even in the absence of physical abuse, helping law enforcement intervene before abuse occurs<sup>33</sup>. However, these laws vary widely in language, intent, and the specific behaviors they address, leading to inconsistencies across jurisdictions. Further, the legal definition of grooming often differs from the concept described in scientific literature. This lack of uniformity complicates both the enforcement of grooming laws and the identification of grooming behaviors.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Leah E. Kaylor, Georgia M. Winters, Elizabeth L. Jeglic & Jennifer Cilli, "An Analysis of Child Sexual Grooming Legislation in the United States," *Psychology, Crime & Law* (2022), DOI: 10.1080/1068316X.2022.2043313.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Mental Health**

Mental health professionals are essential in helping adolescents process the trauma resulting from grooming and sexual abuse. Therapists should use trauma-informed care to help the adolescent unpack the emotional and psychological effects of the abuse, including the impact of manipulation. It is important to address any underlying mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, or PTSD, that may arise as a result of the grooming process. Counselors also help the adolescent rebuild their sense of self-worth and safety.

## **Advocacy**

Advocates provide emotional and practical support to adolescents and their families throughout the investigation and legal process. They help navigate the complex systems of law enforcement, social services, and mental health care, ensuring the adolescent's voice is heard and their rights are protected. Advocates can also provide ongoing emotional support, connect the adolescent with community resources, support groups, and legal assistance, and help them manage the often-overwhelming experience of disclosing abuse. Child Advocacy Centers—or other advocacy agencies—should consider providing the adolescent with their own advocate, separate from the advocate of their caregivers.

## **Medical**

Medical professionals, particularly Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs), understand that physical evidence of abuse may not be present during examination. Many factors influence this outcome, including delayed disclosure, online forms of abuse, and types of contact that leave no physical signs. Despite this challenge, medical professionals play several crucial roles: they document any present injuries, assess overall health, provide preventive care such as STI testing and counseling, and help identify signs of emotional distress or neglect that may indicate ongoing abuse. Their thorough documentation, even when physical evidence is absent, remains valuable for supporting the adolescent's case.

## **Schools**

Schools are often the first place where signs of grooming and sexual abuse become apparent. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators need training to identify red flags, such as sudden changes in behavior, withdrawal, or an unhealthy attachment to a particular adult. When sexual offenders work within a school system, they often employ grooming strategies against their colleagues, as well as their intended victim(s) to avoid detection.<sup>35</sup>

School staff must not ignore red flags, and report any suspected abuse, maltreatment, and grooming of students. Schools should maintain clear reporting protocols and provide a safe environment for adolescents to disclose their experiences.

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<sup>35</sup> Shakeshaft, C., Parry, M., Chong, E., Saima, S., & Lindh, N. (2021). School Employee Sexual Misconduct: Red Flag Grooming Behaviors by Perpetrators." in *Sexual Abuse: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Ersi Kalfoğlu & Sinem Kalfoğlu (IntechOpen, 2021), DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.99234.

Staff should never conduct their own investigations. When information suggesting abuse emerges, the staff member who received it must report immediately, following state mandated reporting guidelines for suspected treatment.

## Conclusion

Addressing grooming behaviors in adolescent sexual abuse cases requires a multidisciplinary approach that recognizes the complexity of manipulation and emotional control used by perpetrators. Understanding the stages of grooming, the subtlety of manipulative tactics, and the impact on the adolescent's perception of the relationship is crucial for effective intervention. Each professional discipline has a unique role to play in identifying, preventing, and responding to these cases. By fostering collaboration among these professionals, teams can provide comprehensive and supportive responses, ensuring the safety, well-being, and empowerment of adolescent victims, while holding offenders accountable for their actions.



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## Appendix: Sample Language for Forensic Interviews

### **Victim Selection**<sup>36</sup>

- How did you feel about [...] the first time you met them?
- What did [...] say about you when they first met you?
- What did others think about [...]?

### **Access Establishment**<sup>37</sup>

- Where would you be alone with [...]?
- Where would others (parents, caregivers, siblings, peers, etc.) be?
- Did [...] help you, or your mom/dad?

### **Trust Development**<sup>38</sup>

- How did you feel about [...] before [...] started happening?
- What kinds of things did [...] first do with you?
- Did [...] give you or your friends things?
- Tell me about any rules [...] had.
- What would happen when you or the other kids broke the rules?
- What did [...] tell you about themselves?
- What did [...] say about (people significant to the child)?

### **Desensitization**<sup>39</sup>

- Tell me about [...] starting.
- What happened next?
- How did you feel about/what did you think about [...] after [...] started happening?

### **Maintenance Following the Abuse**

- Did [...] ever tell you what to say about your relationship?
- Did [...] ever tell you what not to say about your relationship?
- What made it okay to tell now?
- Did something keep you from telling before?

### **Online Grooming and Manipulation**

- How did you and [...] begin talking?
- What app did you first meet on?
- Did [...] ever ask you to communicate on a different app?
- Tell me all of the apps you and [...] have talked on?
- What information did you have about yourself on your profile when you and [...] met?
- What information was on their profile?
- Did [...] ever ask to meet in person?
- Who's idea was it to meet in person?
- How did you know where to meet them?
- Were any pictures or videos exchanged?

**Note:** Forensic Interviewers should employ an hourglass method of questioning/information gathering. Though open-ended questions are most preferred in forensic interviews, we sometimes must ask direct questions to avoid making assumptions, or for clarification. When direct questions are asked, they should always be followed up with open-ended questions such as "Tell me more about that."

<sup>36</sup>National Children's Advocacy Center, "Grooming and Manipulation Fact Sheet" (2019), <https://calio.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Asking-about-manipulation-fact-sheet.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.