

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet is for parents, carers, educators and community members.*

## How abusers groom children and young people

Grooming is a subtle, gradual, escalating process of building trust with children and adults to gain access to and time alone with children. It is deliberate and purposeful and an abuse of power or authority. Grooming is a criminal offence.

### The grooming process:

- Grooming usually begins with behaviours that don't even seem inappropriate.
- Abusers may groom children for weeks, months or years before any sexual abuse takes place.
- Abusers often seek children who seem to be vulnerable. They find ways to fill a need, giving them attention, offering to spend time with them. They make statements like *"I know how it is to need a friend"*.
- They may test the child's boundaries by telling inappropriate jokes, rough-housing, giving backrubs, tickling, or sexual games.
- They then move from non-sexual touching to 'accidental' sexual touching. It can happen during play so the child may not even identify it as deliberate, inappropriate touching. It's often done slowly so the child is gradually desensitised.
- The abuser may use the child's fear, shame, or guilt about what's happened to get them not to tell. They may also use bribes, threats, or coercion.

### How abusers groom adolescents

Grooming adolescents may include the above, as well as the actions listed below.

- Identifying with the child or young person. The abuser may appear to be the only one to understand him/her.
- Displaying common interests in sports, music, movies, video games, television shows, etc.
- Recognising and filling the adolescent's need for affection and attention.
- Giving gifts or special privileges.
- Allowing or encouraging the adolescent to break rules — smoking, drinking, drugs, pornography.
- Communicating with the adolescent outside of the person's role — church or community leader, teacher, coach. This could include texting, emailing, social networking without the parents' or organisation's knowledge.

### How abusers groom parents, carers and other adults

It's not just children and adolescents who are groomed. Abusers also work hard to gain the trust of adults around the child or adolescent. They do this by:

- Befriending the parents or other caregivers;
- Looking for chances to spend time alone with a child (babysitting, sleepovers, driving the child to events); or
- Developing romantic relationships with single parents to gain access to children.

## **Plan for your child's safety**

While you cannot guarantee your child's safety, there are some factors that will increase and decrease the risk of your child being targeted.

### ***Protective Factors***

The following factors can guard against being targeted.

Encourage your child to:

- Display confidence and have a positive outlook and positive body image.
- Set personal boundaries and respect other people's boundaries.
- Know and use the correct names for body parts, including genitals.
- Have a close, secure relationship with at least one adult.
- Be a willing and active member in the community.
- Express a full range of emotions — anger, happiness, fear, sadness.

Ensure your family:

- Uses the correct names for body parts, including genitals.
- Models healthy personal boundaries around touching — with other children and adults.
- Have strong, supportive relationships between family members and an extended network of support.
- Have consistent structure and routine, including spending time together.
- Have a sense of family connectedness and belonging — feeling safe at home, school and in the community.
- Provides close supervision or provide clear boundaries.
- Carefully consider any situation involving alone time.

### ***Risk Factors***

The following factors that may increase the risk of your child being targeted:

If your child is:

- Insecure, has low self-esteem and feels lonely or disconnected.
- Does not know the correct names for body parts.
- Is exposed to music or video games that are violent, sexually explicit or degrading to women.
- Has unsupervised access to technology that can access inappropriate content — internet, phone.
- Lacks access to information about acceptable sexuality.
- Has a disability — cognitive, physical, emotional, learning.

If your family:

- Does not supervise children closely.
- Has children involved in one-on-one situations with an adult or older youth — tutor, coaching, commuting.
- Has high levels of conflict or domestic violence.
- Is dealing with mental health and or substance abuse issues.
- Is socially isolated
- Lacks connection to the community — moves frequently or changes schools often.
- Lacks a strong bond between children and parents — no quality time together.

## **Act proactively to keep your child safe**

Make a list of the protective factors you'd like to increase and the risk factors you'd like to decrease. Be specific. Follow through on the steps you've committed to taking. Review your plan regularly and make additions and adjustments as needed. See the scenarios below.

## **What to do if you notice inappropriate behaviours**

You may see or hear something that is unsettling or has sexual element to it. A situation may make you uneasy or just not feel right. Though you have no reason to believe that any sexual abuse has happened, you're still concerned. For example, you discover a teacher has been exchanging emails and text messages with your 14-year-old son, without your or the school's knowledge; or you overhear an adult male using sexually explicit language around your 12-year-old daughter.

Ask yourself these questions:

Inappropriate behaviours may be part of the grooming process. While confronting these behaviours can be difficult, the wellbeing of children and young people must always come first.

- Does this make me uncomfortable?
- Does it seem odd?
- Would it concern someone else?

## **If you have concerns about a child or young person's safety and wellbeing:**

The following organizations will help you keep children and young people safe. You may be asked for information such as your contact details.

### **Child Protection Crisis Line**

13 12 78 24 hours

7 days a week Toll free within Victoria

### **Victoria Police Sexual Offences Child Investigation Team**

03 5444 6752 24 hours

### **Centre Against Sexual Assault Central Victoria (CASACV)**

03 5441 0430 (BH)

1800 806 292 (AF)