

## Understanding the Grooming Process

**This guidance is for anyone working with children or young people in sport. It explains what is meant by ‘grooming’, the part grooming plays in the sexual abuse of children, and what sports can do to prevent it.**

### Adult-child relationships in sport

Most sports activities and clubs offer excellent opportunities for young people to train, try new things, make friends and improve their skills. They are often the places where appropriate, trusting relationships with adults outside the family or school are first developed. Such relationships of trust should be used appropriately to support and advise young people, and to demonstrate the positive values of sport through role modelling.

However, sport can also provide opportunities for adults with an interest in harming children to target and abuse them through their role as a coach, volunteer or paid employee.

### What is ‘grooming’?

Grooming very commonly plays a key part in the sexual abuse of children and young people. It is defined by the Home Office as communication with a child where this is an intention to meet and commit a sex offence. More generally grooming refers to the process by which an individual manipulates those around them – particularly (but not only) the child – to provide opportunities to abuse. It also reduces the chances of the individual being reported or discovered.

### What type of people groom children for abuse?

Sexual abusers come from all sections of society and can be male or female, adults or other young people. Individuals motivated to harm children will look for opportunities for access to them – commonly in jobs or volunteering roles. There are many examples of children’s sports activities and clubs being targeted in this way, in the same way as schools or care homes have.

Abusers often take steps to ensure they are perceived by others as respectable, reliable and trustworthy people. Research tells us that the vast majority of abusers are well known to the child and their family, often holding positions of trust or authority.

### Why do offenders abuse children?

We cannot fully understand what motivates some seemingly kind and respectable people to groom and abuse children. The important thing is to understand that this can and does happen. At some level most abusers know what they are doing is wrong and harmful, so develop distorted views about appropriate behaviour to justify their actions. Some delude themselves, for example into believing they only want to ‘love’ children, or that the young people enjoy and encourage such behaviour.

Abusers may be able to watch media images of another so called “monster” who abuses and not recognise themselves. They may manage potential feelings of guilt by convincing themselves that their actions don’t constitute abuse, that the abuse is not harmful (or even that it’s good for the child), or that they are actually the victims in the situation. When flashes of reality get through to them they may become depressed. Some may push guilt away, often blaming others, including the child.

### How do abusers control children?

*“I look for a child who seems to be lonely or sad or looking for attention. Then I take my time gaining her trust and becoming her friend. In time she will do anything I ask.”* **Quote from an abuser.**

Child sexual abuse is rarely a single incident or event. To protect children we need to understand that most abusers groom by developing a relationship with a child (and often with the parents or other potentially protective adults). This relationship ultimately harms the child psychologically and physically, often making



them feel responsible and unable to tell. Secrecy is fundamental to the abuse continuing and children are often trapped before they know what has happened.

## We know that abusers may:

- be good at communicating and making friends with children. They can appear to be kind, trustworthy, caring and helpful – often seen as indispensable for the activity/club. They hide their true motives from parents, children and other potentially protective adults
- appear as both nice and nasty to the abused child? *“I can be loving and kind, but if you don’t do what you’re told, you’ll see another side to me.”* They may also be extremely controlling/intimidating and frightening, using fear, threats and violence to get both adults and children to do what they want
- live in or join families in order to abuse children
- assume and misuse a position of authority or influence over the child (for example as their sports coach or mentor)
- look for jobs or volunteer roles which place them in regular contact with children (for example in child care, schools, dance, sports or any activities involving children)
- spend time around places like arcades, playgrounds, parks and sports venues to get to know children so they are not seen as strangers
- offer a combination of attention, gifts, treats, games, outings, money, toys, bribes and threats to children to entrap them. They may threaten the child with physical harm or with the loss of someone they love if they don’t do what the abuser wants
- seek out and join organisations with unclear boundaries around contact with children so as not to draw people’s attention or concerns about their behaviour. For example a club with no guidance on travelling with a young person, photography or texting, or where the prevailing culture is to disregard such safeguarding guidance.

## Targeting children:

Abusers target children who are particularly vulnerable in a way that they can exploit (for example socially isolated or disabled children). In a sports context a child may be vulnerable due to their dependence on a particular coach for success and progress in a sport, or for their place in a team or squad. Most abusers try to find out as much as possible about the child and use the information both to engage the child and to drive a wedge between the child and parent or other potentially protective adults, such as parents, other coaches or club volunteers. The more difficult we make it for abusers to come between children and protective parents or protective adults, the safer children will be.

If the abuser is a family member or in a sports setting, possibly a coach or other person in authority with whom the child has had a long term relationship, it is especially painful to face up to the abuse - and can be even harder for children to say no and to tell. Parents and adults may find it difficult to believe what the child tells them and can retreat into denial which further isolates the child.

When abusers say to a child ‘nobody will believe you’, they are unfortunately too often correct. Many adults struggle to get over the hurdle of believing abuse could happen to someone they know – particularly when they have been groomed by an individual who is well liked and respected or holds a position of authority within the organisation..



## Understanding the process of sexual abuse: Finkelhor's model

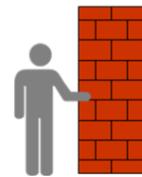
David Finkelhor (1984) proposed a model of child sexual abuse, which describes the four stages that a child sexual offender moves through in order to abuse a child:

1. **Sexual motivation** (*wanting to abuse*)
2. **Overcoming internal inhibitions** (*giving self-permission to abuse*)
3. **Overcoming external inhibitors** (*creating opportunities to abuse*)
4. **Undermining or overcoming the child's resistance to the sexual abuse.**

### Stage 1 Sexual motivation

- Strong urges or desires
- Thinking about something or wanting to do something
- Reinforced by fantasies

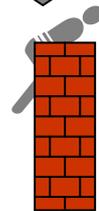
Motivation



### Stage 2 Overcoming internal inhibitions against acting on that motivation

- Giving in to the urge or desire
- Making excuses
- Justifications
- Overcoming conscience

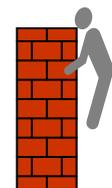
Giving self permission



### Stage 3 Overcoming external impediments to committing sexual abuse (includes grooming of child, protective adults, parents, clubs & organisations)

- How you go about engaging in the behaviour
- Grooming others
- Gaining access to a victim
- Creating situations where abuse can take place
- Reducing the chances of the abuse being discovered or reported, or of disclosures being believed

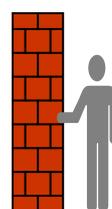
Creating the opportunity



### Stage 4 Undermining or overcoming the child's resistance to the sexual abuse (includes grooming of child)

- Getting the victim to be compliant
- Threats
- Bribes
- Treats
- Force
- Trickery

Overcoming victim's resistance



## How can this model help us to safeguard children from grooming?

By understanding the behaviour of sexual offenders we can place obstacles in their way in order to interrupt this cycle, particularly in stages 3 and 4. For example:

- a) Recruitment and selection - strengthen external inhibitors by preventing access to children and young people by those with a known history of harming children. It also makes it clear that the organisation/club is alert to potential abuse and safeguarding issues, by having policies and practices in place from the outset
- b) Codes of conduct, policies and procedures for reporting and responding to any concerns in the sports environment - strengthens external inhibitors by providing a safeguarding culture and environment within which it is difficult for the person to commit offences and where challenging/reporting concerning behaviour is actively encouraged. Clear, well-advertised rules about e.g. lone working with a child, travel arrangements, and on the use of social media, will make concerning behaviour more obvious to children, parents and other coaches/volunteers.
- c) Raising awareness through training amongst staff, volunteers and children/young people - strengthening the external inhibitors and the child's resistance to the abuse.

## Grooming other adults

Successful abusers groom not only the child but also the adults around the child. This could include the child's family members and people within the sports club. For example, an adult who wanted to abuse a child might spend significant time and energy building a friendship with the child's parents. By grooming the adults around the child, developing a reputation of respectability, helpfulness or popularity within the club, the abuser makes it more difficult for the child to disclose abuse, or for adults (who trust and may know the individual well) to accept even the possibility the allegations could be true.

## The importance of challenging secrets

If abuse remains a secret, abusers will continue to abuse. If someone speaks about the abuse, this allows us to end the abuse, support the child, and may open the door to treatment for the abuser, leading to positive change and them becoming safer citizens. Today there are some effective treatment programmes run by prison and probation services and by voluntary organisations for people who abuse. If you are unsure or worried about the sexual behaviour of someone you know (whether they are an adult or a child) you can contact the Stop It Now! Helpline on 0808 1000 900 [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk).

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