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Protecting God's Children for Adults



The Grooming Process

By [Paul Ashton, Psy.D., D.Min.](#)

*Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies. Do
not give me up to the will of
my adversaries, for false
witnesses have risen
against me, and they are
breathing out violence.*

—Psalm 27:11-12

As some point, we all have been “duped.” Afterwards, we are likely left with raw feelings of bitterness, anger, and resentment—not to mention embarrassment. For the purposes of protecting children, it is important to remember that pedophiles and ephebophiles specialize in their own particular way of duping society. In order to get closer to a potential victim, they engage in the process referred to as “grooming.” When preying upon young people, they use these grooming techniques to gain control of a child, and therefore cooperation.^[1]

The term “grooming” refers to the way in which predators try to mold, fashion, build up, and set up victims and their families in the way that best suits their needs in order to molest the child, all the while appearing innocent of any crime,. Sometimes predators can spend weeks, months, or even years grooming their victims using calculating, manipulative, and deceptive methods all the while being very patient as they seek to gain control over their victims.

We need to be careful to note that perpetrators groom families and caregivers as well. They are clever at deception and seem to know when and where they are needed most in a family situation. Through anticipating the needs of families, sexual abusers are quick to align themselves to the family of a possible victim. They use many of the same grooming skills on families as they do with children.

Offering to baby-sit, pick children up from school, help with school projects, fixing needed repairs in the household, etc., are just some of the things that predators do to gain the trust of parents and families.

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Dr. Ashton presents workshops, courses, retreats, and training seminars in Catholic dioceses across the country. His professional ministry enfolds adult education and praxis, and has included several teaching, counseling, and administrative positions in schools and parishes for several dioceses/eparchies. He also serves as a consultant to diocesan priests and religious communities as a presenter and facilitator.

There are basically three types of grooming:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Community

Physical grooming involves touch. Starting with innocent pats on the back or arm, an acceptable form of touching a younger person, the predator progresses the touch to hugging, tickling, and wrestling. This conditions the child to increasing levels of physical contact.^[2] The perpetrator uses subtle, innocent appearing moves to touch a child. All the while the child feels that nothing is wrong. They might even interpret the touch as like one given from a loving parent; however, each and every touch of the predator is sexual in nature. Over time the predator uses his or her skills to make the child receptive to their touch all the while progressing to sexual contact.

Psychological grooming comes in many forms for both the child and their family. Offenders spend time with their victims; they show children attention and use any possible method of communication that allows the targets to feel they are on the perpetrator's level and that the offender understands them. This is a key factor in this process. Perpetrators become peers to their victims—peers with power and thus, control. Special gifts, treats, breaking of rules, foods, trips, and attention allow for a deep connection to be forged by the perpetrator. When the child pulls away, the perpetrator shows signs of rejection and unhappiness, and the child feels guilt and confusion. At other times perpetrators resort to physical threats to their family, pets, or friends if the child wants to discontinue this “special relationship.” Psychological grooming, playing games with the innocence of a child's mind, preying upon the guilt of parents who feel good that another adult is showing their child attention—all of these tactics are part of psychological grooming.

Community grooming is the way in which a molester creates a controlled environment around himself or herself. The perpetrator projects an image (false and misleading, of course) to adults, that they are responsible and caring citizens. They mimic the behavior of good people to get closer to children so that they might molest them. When an allegation comes forward it is easily explained away by other adults who have been groomed by the perpetrator to think that they would never harm a child.

When employing these grooming tactics with a child, secrecy is the key. They manipulate the child to keep the abuse they are experiencing secret. This secrecy binds the child to the molester. Perpetrators often employ the following tactics to keep secrets:

Bribery—“I'll let you stay up late and watch TV if you let me do this.”

Threats of Harm to the Child—“You are really going to get it if you tell anyone.”

Threats of Harm to the Offender—“If you tell, I'll go to jail.”

Withdrawal of Affection—“I won't like you anymore if you tell.”

Implications about the Child's Family—“This would really hurt your mother if she knew.”

Taking Advantage of the Child's Innocence—“It's OK, everybody does this,” or “if you tell anyone, I'll just say you were lying.”^[3]

One of the first rules that a family should establish is “no secrets!” Mothers and fathers should never ask their children to keep a secret from anyone. By forbidding secrets, parents create an atmosphere where a child learns that no adult can force them to keep something secret or hidden.

His work in the area of child sexual abuse prevention and healing includes training facilitators, developing and implementing curricula and retreat programs, counseling, and support group facilitation development. Paul is the founder of OPEN HEARTS HIV/AIDS Ministry and has supervised support and bereavement groups for over 20 years. Dr. Ashton holds a B.A. degree in religious studies, an M.A. in clinical pastoral counseling, a D.Min. in counseling and marriage and family therapy and a doctorate in psychology (Psy.D.).

Yes, we all have been duped at some point in our lives. As adults, we know how difficult it is to read the motives of many people who interact with us. Consider how much more difficult it is for a child to distinguish this behavior?

1) Mary is a single mother of three and she works full time. Her eldest daughter, 12, is a loner who likes to read, play video games, and do word puzzles. Her two youngest are outgoing and enjoy the company of friends at school and playing in the neighborhood with other children. Mary is concerned about her eldest, Katie, and has noticed that she likes being around older adults rather than with kids her own age. A favorite is their neighbor, a family friend, who calls her often and visits—bringing her special treats. She tells Mary that, "Katie needs special attention—she is shy and doesn't have many friends." At least twice monthly the neighbor takes her shopping, or to a movie etc. Often this person brings gifts for Katie without anything for her two youngest children. Mary should:

- A) ☐ Tell her that the neighbor that bringing Katie special gifts without bringing her other two children something and without checking with her first is inappropriate.
- B) ☐ Talk to Katie and her sisters about the people who might take advantage of them and briefly explain grooming and some of the overtures an offender might make.
- C) ☐ Watch Katie's behavior closely and talk to her about her relationship with their neighbor.
- D) ☐ All of the above

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[1] Protecting God's Children Facilitator Training Manual p. 69.

[2] Ibid. p.69.

[3] Grooming Cybervictims: The Psychosocial Effects of Online Exploitation for Youth Copyright Year: 2003. Contributors: Ilene R. Berson, Assistant Professor, Department of Child and Family Studies, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida, Tampa

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