



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families & Communities

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

WHAT IS GROOMING?

Grooming is what experts call the intentional actions and behaviors sexual predators use to try to gain access to children they want to molest or sexually abuse. People often think predators pick their child victims at random, or that we only need to focus on "stranger danger." But most child sexual abusers know and have some sort of relationship with their victims. Predators often try to groom children, adults, and even whole communities so they can:

- Gain access to children they abuse.
- Hide their actions.
- Decrease the risk they will be found out and stopped.

This fact sheet is designed to help you learn to recognize some common tactics that child sexual predators use to groom and manipulate children, adults, families, and communities.

PREDATORY CHILD GROOMING TACTICS

Predators certainly groom their young victims. But they also groom the victims' parents, family members, other close adults, and community members to establish a sense of trust and safety in those adults, create opportunities to access the child, and decrease the chances of being caught. Predators may develop and carry out long-term plans to gain a family's trust with tactics such as:

- Providing a valuable service to the adults or the whole family (Arévalo et al., 2014; van Dam, 2001). When the family car breaks down, for example, a predator may offer rides to work or school and claim they want nothing in return for their kindness. This helps the predator gain the adults' trust and makes the child think it's normal and safe to ride in the predator's vehicle. When someone helps your family, it's easy to decide that they're a good person and you can let down your guard around them. Unfortunately, doing so may give a predator easy access to the children in your family.

Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets we have chosen to use the inclusive words they, their, and them as singular, nongendered pronouns.

We know that families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A family may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. Parents may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words family and parent in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.





- Offering help to isolated families with limited support systems (van Dam, 2001). A family with financial troubles and no friends or extended family who can help them out, for example, may find it hard to refuse a predator's offer to buy a winter coat.
- Showing up unexpectedly at events they haven't been invited to (van Dam, 2001). Such events may be child-focused (such as youth sports, concerts, or recitals) or child-free (such as event planning committee meetings or a local restaurant or bar's trivia contest or game night). The more often we see a person around children and around town, the easier it becomes to tell ourselves the person is safe around children.
- Being charming (van Dam, 2001). We're used to thinking of predators as strangers who look weird, shifty, or just generally unsafe. The reality is, however, that many predators are incredibly charming, and so friendly, affable, and engaging that it's easy to relax your guard around them. When you notice a charming person, tell yourself: "*Charm* is a noun **and** a verb. That person who is behaving in such a charming way is trying to charm me." Then ask yourself why.
- Being actively involved in the community (van Dam, 2001). Predators often try to establish reputations as productive, respected, and trustworthy community members. They may serve on local boards; volunteer with service, professional, or civic organizations; be active participants in a faith community; or coach or officiate in youth sports leagues. These activities help them build rapport, support, and trust in the community—and give them access to children. It's too easy to assume children are safe around someone just because they have community approval, whether inherited or perceived. (Inherited or perceived community approval may lead us to trust someone we don't know because they (a) are trusted by another person we know and trust, or (b) are well-known in our community.)
- Becoming known to you. Even a casual acquaintance with someone can make us comfortable enough to let our guard down around them. Predators not only look for chances to be helpful to families, they also try hard to become familiar enough faces that adults recognize and trust them.

WHY IT IS DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE PREDATORY BEHAVIOR TARGETING ADULTS & FAMILIES

Several factors can make it hard to spot a predator's grooming behavior:

- The predator may be extremely skilled at masking their intentions.
- We may ignore or be afraid to trust our gut feelings and instincts about what we're seeing and hearing.
- We may be determined to believe the best about people.
- We may be afraid our family will lose the help and support of the person we're concerned about if we act on our suspicions.

Ignoring a gut feeling that something is wrong or a nagging question we have about someone could have terrible, lifelong consequences for the targeted child and their family.

GROOMING THE COMMUNITY

In addition to grooming children and families, predators often try to groom whole communities (Arévalo, et al., 2014; van Dam, 2001). As mentioned earlier, this level of grooming is designed first to establish the predator's reputation as a productive, respected, trustworthy member of the community. They may serve on local boards; volunteer with service, professional, or civic organizations; be active participants in a faith community; or coach or officiate in youth sports leagues.





Once a predator has built a solid reputation, they use it to:

- Gain easier access to potential child victims because parents and families believe that children are safe around them.
- Avoid suspicion, detection, and prosecution.
- Build support from organizations and community members who may rally around them if they are ever accused of child sexual abuse.

Quite often when allegations of abuse are brought against a predator who has successfully groomed a local community, residents will lobby on behalf of the person and proclaim that this respected pillar of the community couldn't possibly have committed such horrendous acts.

WHY IT IS DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE PREDATORY BEHAVIOR TARGETING COMMUNITIES

Community grooming and child sexual abuse are often hard to detect and even harder for people to believe when a predator is discovered because:

- Predators try so hard to provide valued services to their community.
- People generally want to believe the best about others, even in the face of evidence to the contrary.
- People let their feelings of respect for and trust in the accused person cloud their judgment.

Many predators have taken advantage of their community's disbelief to continue to hurt and abuse children even after they have been accused.

EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, be actively involved, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in protecting your child and helping them build the skills that will help them stay safe as they get older.

This doesn't mean that you have to prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It's a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. There are a lot of things you can do to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living fully and enjoying the world around you.

REFERENCES

Arévalo, E., Chavira, D., Cooper, B., & Smith, M. (2014). *SAFE (Screening applicants for effectiveness): Guidelines to prevent child molestation in mentoring and youth-serving organizations*. Friends for Youth Inc.

van Dam, C., (2001). *Identifying child molesters: Preventing child sexual abuse by recognizing the patterns of the offenders*. Routledge.

Acknowledgments

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**FIND OUT MORE**

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other MSU Extension resources:

- **Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines, as well as from evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, and afterschool programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3jG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; sharing about kids on social media, and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently seven titles in the series:
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan*. <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2011). *Preventing and identifying child sexual abuse—Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics*. <https://bit.ly/3iENpyB>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2019). *Media and children communication toolkit*. <https://bit.ly/3iDaGku>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources*. Retrieved from <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources*. <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>

