

# The Many Stages of Grooming

By [The VIRTUS® Programs](#)

An essential goal of the *Protecting God's Children*® Program for adults is the identification of potentially inappropriate behaviors exhibited by adults that could be grooming. The "grooming process" is the means for the offender to gain control over a child and the persons surrounding the child, to obtain the type of relationship or sexual molestation the molester seeks. The VIRTUS® Programs have written many articles over the years about grooming behaviors. However, the articles have not fully discussed how those behaviors fit into a multi-stage process predators go through.



One clear and simple model of steps was developed that allows us to look at the process and the behaviors we have already identified and see just how sexual abuse might happen in our environment.<sup>1</sup> Recall from your initial VIRTUS training that grooming can affect not just the targeted victim, but all of the persons in the victim's life and community, too. It can happen in-person, or online.

Before discussing the intricacies of grooming and particular areas of concern for us within the community who are charged with advocating for

youth and protecting them, it is important to first understand the distinctions between the different types of abusers. One matrix classifies child abusers into two main, basic categories: preferential and situational abusers.

Preferential abusers are the types who would prefer to be with a child within the context of a relationship—even if they also have the guise of adult relationships, too. The preferential offender may fixate on a specific characteristic of their victims (gender, age, physical characteristics), and will always have a premeditated plan. They will seek, or make, opportunities to have ample access to their preferred type of child. Preferential offenders comprise a smaller percentage of abusers, but have a large ratio of victims to each abuser.

Conversely, the situational abuser does not necessarily prefer a relationship with a child over a relationship with another adult. But, they may offend under a certain set of circumstances, such as an extreme difficult time in his or her life, with a higher likelihood of offense while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, severe depression or anxiety. The behavior is not as planned as the preferential abuser's, and they typically have one or two victims verses the larger cohort of the preferential abuses.

In most cases, for both preferential and situational offenders, you will see the grooming behaviors performed on the child and on the community. All of the steps, outlined below, will be evident within that grooming process for preferential and situational abusers. For the offender, it can take concentration, time and commitment to groom a child to the extent that abuse is possible. For caring adults, it is not always easy to identify the intentions of adults in the environment who are interacting with our children. For example, are the adult's actions predatory or simply inappropriate? Are they ignoring the rules or did they even know about them in the first place? Are they themselves aware that their behavior is contrary to the code of conduct? Did they even read the code of conduct? ...Did *you* read the code of conduct to know what was acceptable and

unacceptable? Do you know what is actually safe and unsafe behavior for your organization?

**Stage 1: Picking out or targeting a potential victim.** All types of offenders look for children who are emotionally "needy" or those who are isolated in some way. They also watch out for children with lower self-confidence or self-esteem. In group settings, predators become familiar with everyone and watch for vulnerabilities amongst everyone within the group before they single out the victim with whom they feel they will have the ability to abuse and also not get caught.

**Stage 2: Establishing and building trust.** Many problematic behaviors are intended to establish or build trust between the child and the potential predator. Predators start by watching children, getting acquainted, and finding out what they like and what they need. This is also the time when molesters start to groom the families and other responsible adults in the child's life. They work very hard to inspire trust and to create an appearance of being safe.

**Stage 3: Meeting the needs of children and caregivers.** Once the molester is ingratiated into the lives of the children, their parents and caregivers, then gifts, extra attention and affection appear in the relationships. This is the psychological aspect of grooming. Pay attention to any adult who has secured a prominent place in the child's life or seems to now be the child's hero. Do remember that all adults who become important to children are not all also child molesters. Before assuming that child abuse is occurring, look at the relationship in the context of these stages and the other elements necessary to create safe environments.

**Stage 4: Secluding the child.** As these social and somewhat dependent relationships are established, the grooming process moves on to the next phase and the molester begins to create times and situations where the adult and the child are alone together—as unsupervised as possible. Babysitting, one-on-one coaching or mentoring, picking up the youth from school, private music lessons, tutoring and special trips are among the ways that molesters create these opportunities without raising suspicion with parents or caring adults. One way caring adults can help thwart any potential grooming (intentional or not) during this stage is to ensure that they, themselves, are never in an unsupervised situation with children within a ministry (or other) context, and that they do not allow other adults to be in isolated environments with children, either.

**Stage 5: Engaging in sexual activity.** When the child is emotionally dependent on the predator and seemingly has fully trust with the person, the predator begins to desensitize the child's natural resistance to sexual contact. This can happen through showing pornography, sexually graphic jokes or inviting children to participate in inappropriate activities such as skinny dipping in the pond or pool after dark. Predators also exploit children's natural sexual curiosity. The predator has a lot of power in this part of the process and can create an environment and relationship that seems to the child to be a trap that is inescapable.

**Stage 6: Maintaining over time.** Blame, secrecy, and threats are the most common tools in this part of the process. Approximately 42% of all adults who admitted to being molested as children had never told anyone about the abuse. These findings clearly show us that the manipulative actions predators take do keep the children from speaking up and getting help.

We always want to notice the potentially inappropriate behaviors adults are exhibiting and interrupt them. When in the context of ministry, interrupting warning signs of inappropriate behavior that an adult is exhibiting can mean speaking immediately to a supervisor about what has been observed—even if it means speaking to them more than once about it, or speaking to that person's supervisor if you feel nothing has been done. Reading the code of conduct for our respective organizations, along with examining the stages of the grooming process can help us navigate these waters and better identify what is and is not grooming—and therefore help us to communicate concerns when issues crop up.

1) As a caring adult, what are some ways that you can interrupt a potential grooming situation?

- A) Speak immediately, and directly to a supervisor about the behavior you're observing.
- B) Speak to a supervisor a second time if you see the behavior again, or, speak to someone higher up in the "chain of command."
- C) Review the organization's code of conduct so that you are better aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior.
- D) All of the above.