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Stewards of Children® Participants...Never Stop Learning!

You are receiving this email because you have attended a Stewards of Children training with Chaucie's Place. We want to continue to provide you helpful information, tips, stories in the news, trainings, and other valuable resources to expand your awareness and strengthen your role as a steward of children. Without ongoing education and dialogue in our community, it is impossible to move forward and end this epidemic.

Grooming Behaviors and How to Prevent or Stop Them

While assessing the *Stewards of Children* post-evaluations, we try to pull out some common issues and concerns attendees have about child sexual abuse and address them through our Never Stop Learning newsletter. This month we discuss grooming, the warning signs, and what parents can do to prevent and stop it.

What is Grooming?

Grooming is the process used by a perpetrator to gain the trust of a potential victim and the community with the ultimate goal of engaging the potential victim in sexual activity. Many times, perpetrators target children who they feel are vulnerable. This may be a child who suffers from low self-esteem or a lack of confidence, feels unloved, appears unpopular, spends a lot of time alone, is frequently unsupervised, or experiences familial problems. Though specific grooming tactics differ from perpetrator to perpetrator, patterns can be found, as it quickly becomes apparent to a predator that emotional seduction is the quickest and easiest way to manipulate children and ease into abuse. Grooming, therefore, in essence, is the manipulation of a child for the purposes of engaging in sexual behavior.

The Grooming Process

The progression, typically, is as follows.

Building trust

In short, perpetrators try to make a child feel special and as if they share a special bond. They typically listen to children and are sympathetic towards them, furthering the emotional connection. This foundation of trust can make it difficult for a child to disclose sexual abuse, as victims may be afraid to tell on someone they trust. Additionally, a victim may be conditioned to believe that what the perpetrator is doing is okay because they share a special bond and the perpetrator is perceived as

someone to be trusted.

This process can take a long time and may go unnoticed by parents until it is too late. Perpetrators are often very skilled at making themselves likable and invaluable, slowly building trust over months and even years. Parents, therefore, can have difficulty spotting grooming. When they fail to do so, parents can feel extremely guilty that they have failed to protect their child.

Reassuring the child's family

It is easy to assume that only a potential child victim is subjected to grooming behaviors. However, a perpetrator's reach is usually more wide-reaching. In order to gain access to a child, a perpetrator will try to befriend and groom the child's parents or guardians. He or she might seem like an ideal friend, offering help when needed and becoming a reliable individual who can be trusted not only to assist the family, but also to be alone with children. Parents therefore might allow a predator to give their children rides, take them on trips, and even babysit. Since parents who have been groomed develop a sense of trust and security, many families are shocked when they discover their child has been sexually abused by the individual in question.

Eroding boundaries

Most perpetrators try to escalate physical contact by desensitizing a child to inappropriate touches. Typically, an abuser will initiate nonsexual touching, such as holding hands and rubbing backs, as a way to test a child's limits. Then, he or she may pretend to accidentally touch a child inappropriately, such as when pushing a child on a swing. The perpetrator then continues nonsexual touches, which, over time, erode the child's boundaries and opens the door to overt sexual touching. Other ways boundaries can be eroded include placing one's self in close proximity to a child and encouraging a child to partake in inappropriate behaviors like drinking alcohol or viewing pornography.

Since a foundation of trust has likely already been built at this point, many children find it hard to say "no" to unwanted touches. In some instances, a child may not even realize that the touching is inappropriate, since he or she has slowly been exposed to it by someone they trust. This can create significant problems related to disclosure.

Establishing Secrecy

Once physical boundaries are eroded, perpetrators create secrecy around their relationship with a child. They often instill fear in the child by saying the child will get in trouble if he or she tells about inappropriate acts that have occurred or are ongoing. Many abusers also create secrecy by telling a child that the inappropriate touches are actually good and part of a special relationship, one that would end if the child tells. Negative consequences are also often associated with speaking out about the abuse, such as telling a child that his or her family will hate him or her or that the perpetrator and the child will no longer be friends. In some instances, a perpetrator will even threaten a child, his or her family, and/or the family pet with physical harm in an effort to keep the child quiet about ongoing abuse.

Acquiring Compliance

The last step in the grooming process is securing compliance. Once trust and secrecy are in place and physical boundaries begin to disappear, a perpetrator will then escalate to sexual behaviors. Once a perpetrator has reached this step, the cycle of abuse may continue for years as many children are afraid to disobey, break secrecy, or tell for fear of repercussions.

How to Prevent and Stop Grooming

Statistics show that it is impossible to know who is a perpetrator. They can be either gender, any age, and they can be a stranger or, as is the case 90 percent of time, someone the victim knows. This means that preventing and stopping grooming requires diligence and possibly confronting a neighbor, close friend, or family member.

If you ever find yourself in this position, it is important that you do not blame yourself for what has happened.

Develop comfort with the topic

By developing a strong relationship with your child you ensure he or she is comfortable talking to you about things that bother him or her, including inappropriate boundary violations. You can further their comfort with discussing body safety by initiating a dialog about the subject. Just as we teach children how to swim, to look both ways before crossing the street, and to put on a seat belt when in a car, we should teach them that their bodies belong to them and that they can say "No!" to any unwanted touches from anybody. When you have this conversation with your children, your children will view you as an expert on body safety and will then come to you when they have questions or concerns.

Bystander intervention

As you learned in your *Stewards of Children* training, bystander intervention is a great way to curb potential grooming behavior. For example, if someone is tickling a child and the child looks uncomfortable, then you might need to step in to protect that child. When approaching an individual about inappropriate boundary violations, be sure to describe the behavior, then inform the individual that the behavior is inappropriate and unacceptable. Next, tell the individual to stop the behavior. It is important not to correct the child in these instances, but to specifically address the adult exhibiting inappropriate behaviors. After all, it is never a child's fault when someone is violating his or her boundaries.

When ceasing potential grooming behavior, do not do so in an accusatory manner. Not all individuals who engage in such behaviors are predators. Sometimes an individual does not know that a line has been crossed or that anything wrong was done. By correcting the behavior you can ensure the actions are stopped and that they will not occur again. This modeling of behavior may help others realize that boundaries must be set and maintained.

Listen to your children

They may be trying to tell you about a situation that makes them feel uncomfortable, but do not know how to do so clearly. It is up to you to be attentive and attempt to understand exactly what your child is trying to say. So if your child says he does not like being somewhere or with someone, ask him why and really listen.

Don't be afraid

At some point, you might witness inappropriate touching or outright abuse, or your child might disclose abuse to you. If your child discloses to you, tell him or her that you believe him or her and that you are proud of him or her for being brave. The mere thought can be scary, but you must be strong and prepare yourself to deal with the situation. If you come into contact with a perpetrator, he or she may try to excuse the behavior. For example, he or she might claim that he or she was merely helping

the child with personal hygiene or that the ordeal was a misunderstanding. However, if you have witnessed abuse or suspect abuse, you need to be brave for your child and immediately contact the Department of Child Services and your local law enforcement agency.

Thinking about child sexual abuse can be frightening. However, there is a lot you can do to keep your children safe. By developing a strong and open relationship with your children, having awareness of grooming signs, and correcting behavior that violates your children's boundaries, you can prevent or stop child sexual abuse and ensure your children are as safe as possible.

Information provided by:

[The National Center for Victims of Crime](#)

The nation's leading resource and advocacy organization for crime victims and those who serve them.

[The U.S. Department of Justice](#)

The Department's National Sex Offender Public Website provides information about how to recognize sexual abuse and tips on how to talk to children about sexual abuse.

[Boys Town](#)

This site provides a lot of parenting tips, including those that relate to child sexual abuse and grooming.

[Enough-Is-Enough](#)

A nonprofit organization dedicated to making the Internet safer for children; this website dedicates a significant portion of its focus to online predators.

[Not With My Child](#)

Not With My Child informs and educates the public about child predators and pedophiles in order to eliminate the threat they pose to children

[The Official Website of Andrew Vachss](#)

An attorney for nearly three decades focusing on matters dealing with children, this website offers valuable insight into child sexual abuse and how to prevent and stop it.

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About Chaucie's Place

Chaucie's Place works passionately to ensure the welfare of children by offering evidence-based; high-quality prevention programs to end the cycle of abuse and to empower children and adults to ensure that children of central Indiana have the opportunity to live to their highest potential.

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