

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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By David Prescott and Joan Tabachnick

“What We Know (and Don’t Know) About ‘Grooming’ Behaviors”

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QUESTION:

How can the concept of “grooming” be used effectively in prevention and forensic work?

RESEARCH:

Since the 1980’s, researchers have suggested that adults who sexually abuse a child will often employ a “seduction stage” often known as “grooming” before they harm the child. Grooming is understood as a process to identify a particularly vulnerable child, gain access to that child, and prepare that child to be compliant with the abuse.

In their article, Natalie Bennett and William O’Donohue carefully review the literature regarding grooming and note that there is a lack of consensus regarding the grooming

process and how it is clearly distinguished from healthy adult-child interactions. For example, buying gifts for a child or taking them on private outings are often behaviors that adults will naturally do with children they care about. The authors suggest that if a consistent grooming process could be identified, it would allow professionals to identify this behavior and intervene before a child is harmed. Additionally, in a forensic context, sexual abuse allegations could be at least partially substantiated if it could be established that grooming was in fact, intentional. However, without a clear and consistent definition and a way of measuring this behavior, any practical use is at best, problematic.

Based upon the major commonalities in definitions, the authors proposed the following: Grooming can be defined as “*antecedent inappropriate behavior that functions to increase the likelihood of future sexual abuse.*” The criteria to be met therefore includes: 1) behavior must in and of itself be inappropriate and a case for this inappropriateness must be made, and 2) a sound argument must be presented that the behavior(s) increases the likelihood of future sexual abuse. The authors then describe some examples of grooming behaviors and note that the more of these features that are present, the more likely that a child or teen is being groomed. These features included:

- Any sexualization of a relationship between adult and child or teen
- Inappropriate gift giving such as bikinis or bras purchased by a neighbor or teacher
- Age inappropriate nonsexual communication with a child (e.g., telling him or her that they are the only one who can really understand the adult)
- Inappropriate or excessive touching of the child or teen
- Bribes in exchange for inappropriate contact
- Boundary violations
- Asking a child or teen to keep secrets
- And many others

The authors recognize that the term “inappropriate” is somewhat vague and requires some judgement. They also acknowledge that some inappropriate behaviors may not be grooming behaviors at all. Finally, the authors suggest that validity studies be conducted to see the extent to which trained professionals can correctly identify these behaviors.

BOTTOM LINE: While grooming may be a popular concept, there is no common definition or any validation to allow it to be accurately applied to an investigative setting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS:

Many authors have attempted to bring about clarity in what “grooming” actually is, and as mentioned by the authors, it is problematic on many levels. Not only is the term vague, but so are many of the behavioral examples used by anyone talking about this term. Given the current use of “grooming” to describe sex offending behaviors, the authors’ attempts at clarification are praiseworthy. However, it is worthwhile to note that many of the studies they relied on are from the 1980s. One wonders if it is not a dated concept in its current form. Recent research has shown that the goals and motivations underlying grooming can vary widely, and that pre-offense processes are not necessarily explicit or planned. Further, the concept of grooming as an explicit process rarely takes into account what is now known about both static and dynamic risk factors. If the purpose of refining the concept of “grooming” is to identify imminent abuse before it happens, then incorporating the current research about risk factors to offend and re-offend would be helpful. Finally, there is no mention of how grooming behaviors may vary from culture to culture and how some of the social norms of one culture may skew how behaviors are viewed by another culture.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD:

There is no question that grooming is a popular concept in the media, for individuals interested in this issue, and among many professionals. It is often fairly easy, in retrospect, to see the signs that one comes to believe were obvious clues. However, some of those behaviors may also be clues to healthy parenting. We agree with the authors that, the popularity of the vague notion of grooming makes further empirical study all the more necessary. Because grooming implies intent, more research on the processes underlying overt behaviors is needed. In the meantime, organizations (including but not limited to those that serve youth) have both an opportunity and an

obligation to establish clear social norms, codes of conduct, and expectation around behaviors -- making it harder for individuals to step outside of a clear set of behavioral expectations and an established response by an organization to these violations.

Abstract:

There have been claims that some child molesters engage in a “seduction stage” prior to committing abuse. These behaviors, commonly known as “grooming,” are understood as methods child molesters use to gain access to and prepare future victims to be compliant with abuse. However, there is a lack of consensus regarding exactly what this process entails and how it is clearly distinguished from normal adult–child interactions. It is important to devise an accurate definition of grooming for scientific, clinical, and forensic purposes. We critically evaluate the various definitions and reveal problematic heterogeneity. Furthermore, there are no methods of known psychometrics to validly assess grooming. We review the empirical literature regarding the occurrence of grooming and propose future directions for research.

Citation:

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