

# The Stages of Online Grooming: Inside the Mind of a Predator

Adapted from an article by [Jami Nesbitt](#) | Aug 24, 2018 | [Internet Safety Tips](#)

Grooming is the process by which someone befriends and gains the trust of a child (and sometimes the child's friends and family) in order to take advantage of the child for sexual purposes.

To accomplish this, predators are masters at manipulation, often appearing kind and helpful. However, there are grooming signs you should be aware of, including the six stages of grooming. These red flags could mean a child is experiencing grooming by an online sexual predator.

*\*This article can open wounds for people who have been victimized\**

## Friendship Forming Stage: Targeting and Gaining Trust

The friendship forming stage is composed of conversations in which the predator tries to get introduced to the child. Predators target vulnerable children – those who are needy, unhappy, unable to talk about abuse, or have less parental oversight. Next, the predator will gather information about the child and the child's family to gain the child's trust over time. It's extremely important to be aware of new people in your life and the amount of time they spend with your child and your family. Make sure your child knows that they can talk to you about anything and that you're there to listen.

**Example:** Predator exchanges information with the child or parent to get personal contact information, such as email addresses or usernames for social media sites. Additionally, the predator inquires about the relationships in the household.

## Relationship Forming Stage: Filling the Child's (or Family's) Needs

After gaining access to the child, the predator starts forming a relationship by talking to them about family and school life. Next, the predator fills some sort of need that the child or the family has to ingrain himself into their lives. This may be monetary in nature; for example, a single mother struggling to pay the bills may receive cash or offers to take care of bills.

Predators may also fill a child's desire for attention by buying them gifts, taking them places, etc. Be aware of any gifts your child may receive from other adults, especially electronic devices. Be extra cautious if someone you haven't known long offers to help in an overly generous manner.

**Example:** The predator tries to know more about the interest and hobbies of the child so that they can exploit them. They deceive the child into believing they are in a relationship. At this stage the predator gives soft compliments, calling them "sweetie," "cutie," etc.

## Risk Assessment Stage: Gauging the Level of Threat

The predator at this stage tries to gauge the level of threat and danger the caregivers pose. They ask questions to see how closely the child is monitored online and in real life. They try to gauge how close the child is to the family and whether their actions will be reported and believed.

In an interview with two child sex offenders, [WBIR 10NEWS reported](#) that one of the top deterrents for predators were adults who monitor the electronic communications of the child. Close relationships, close monitoring, and a child who has been warned about predators are huge threats to a predator.

**Example:** Predators will ask questions like, "Are your parents around?" and "Who else uses the computer?" or "Can you delete your chats?" and "Do your parents monitor your online accounts?"

### **Exclusivity Stage: Isolating the Child from Others**

At this stage, the predator tries to gain the trust of the child completely. The predator asserts that they share a special bond. Often the concept of love and care are introduced.

A predator will look for opportunities to spend time alone with the child. They will often use sly tactics to create these situations and use this time to further reinforce the idea of a special relationship. Trips to amusement parks, offers to tutor your child for free, and other similar situations may signify that your child is being groomed. Trust your instincts should you feel something is amiss.

**Examples:** Feelings of love and exclusiveness are expressed by the predator. Strong compliments are given. They will say things like, “You are a sweetheart,” or “You are so cute when you look like that,” or “I feel a deep connection with you I don’t feel with anyone else.”

### **Sexual Stage: Desensitizing the Child**

During the sexual stage, predators ask questions about the child’s sexuality. They will ask things like, “Are you a virgin?” or will talk about masturbation. Some pedophiles talk in great depth about sexual activities with the child to desensitize them to the language and content. They do this to prepare the child for actual physical interaction.

Predators have been known to show children pictures of other children without their clothing in order to make it appear “normal” and “natural.” Some even take the child swimming naked together in an effort to play to the child’s natural curiosity. The predator may introduce porn videos. For this reason, it is important to maintain an open line of communication with your children and act on anything that doesn’t seem **typical age-appropriate sexual curiosity**.

**Examples:** The predator gives sexual-oriented compliments, exchanges sexualized pictures, and gives body and figure descriptions. They will say things like, “you are sexy,” ask the child to be their boyfriend or girlfriend, or ask for nudes and sexual text messages.

### **Conclusion Stage: Controlling the Child and Situation**

The conclusion stage occurs when the pedophile begins the physical abuse. Once it begins, they will go to great lengths to maintain control. In most cases, the offender uses secrecy, blame, and even threats to keep the child from saying anything.

The predator’s goal is to maintain the child’s participation, all while hiding it from everyone else. If your child appears withdrawn and sullen, or if they appear fearful and depressed when it’s time to see a particular person, this may be a sign that they’ve been conditioned to remain silent about activities with this person. Let your children know they can come to you when anyone asks them to do something they are not comfortable with — even if that person is an adult.

**Examples:** A predator will ask questions in this stage like, “Are you able to meet up with me alone or do your parents always have to know everything?” or “Can you sneak out of your house and meet up at a McDonald’s for a treat” or “When we meet I can’t wait to hug you and kiss you” or “Can you walk to our meeting place or is there a place away from your house I can pick you up in my car?” Questions like this ensure the child comes alone and the predator controls how they meet.

## Grooming Signs of an Online Sexual Predator

There are a number of signs to be aware of that may suggest online grooming is taking place. Although some may seem like typical teen behavior, it's still important to watch out for:

- Wanting or asking to spend more time on the internet
- Being secretive about the sites they visit or who they are talking to online
- Switching screens when you come near them when they are on their computer or phone
- Possessing new items you haven't given them, especially electronic devices
- Using sexual language you wouldn't expect them to know or that is not **age-appropriate**
- Emotions that become more volatile

**An informative study** by the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology found that a predator does not necessarily move sequentially through the stages. They also discovered that the relationship forming stage is the most dominant online grooming stage. In other words, more than one stage can be in process at once, and predators do not necessarily go in any particular order.

The truth is, grooming signs can be difficult to spot. This is because sexual predators tend to also befriend parents and caregivers. Maintaining an open line of communication with your child and paying extra attention to the amount of time they spend with other adults, as well as **monitoring their online activity** with a parental control app, can help protect your child from online sexual predators.