

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse is a form of child abuse in which an adult or older adolescent uses a child for any kind of sexual gratification. Most sexual abusers are acquainted with the child. In most of the time it is the relative of the child, most often brothers, fathers, uncles or cousins. Sometimes it is also the acquaintances, such as friends of the family, babysitters or a neighbour. The abuser gains the trust of potential victims and their caregivers by grooming them in a planned manner.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, Grooming, Disclosure.

INTRODUCTION

According to WHO "Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society.

Some of the key concepts in this article is "grooming" of the victim and the family for abuse by the perpetrator and the disclosure of the sexual abuse by the child.

GROOMING

Grooming is the process by which the offender develops a slow emotional relationship with the child with the intention of sexual abuse. The process of grooming may happen in virtual world or online. The process is usually done by the offender in a very meticulous way that usually the young does not understand that they are being groomed or what is happening is an abuse.

Children and young people can be groomed online or in the real world, by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional. Groomers may be male or female. They could be of any age. Many children and young people do not realise that they have been groomed.

ABUSERS DO THIS BY —

- Pretending to be someone they are not, for example saying online that they are the same age.
- Offering advice or understanding. Giving the child extra attention, build a friendship with the child. Make them feel special and loved to have an adult friend that encourages and flatters them. May make the child believe they love them, in a romantic way.
- Tickle, wrestle, hug, kiss, hold, and touch a child even if they do not want to. People often think person is being friendly, and don't realise the potential for abuse.
- "Accidentally" touch a child's private parts to see how they react.
- Lack of respect for privacy - walk in on them while they are using the washroom or are dressing up. Another "accident" or an attempt to create an environment where it's "OK" to be naked or exposed in each other's company.
- Make inappropriate/ sexual comments or jokes to the child or even to others, regarding the child.
- Give gifts for no apparent reason; allow the child special privileges or treatment.
- Test the child's reaction to affection/ touching - putting an arm on the shoulder, a back rub, a long hug that leads to further testing - a kiss on the lips, a hand on the knee.
- Using their professional position or reputation

- Taking the target child on trips, outings or holidays.

Surprisingly grooming happens in public too. We think grooming is done in private but it is easier for the abuser to build close relationship with a child in front of others because people are less likely to be suspicious. The stereotype belief is that sexual predators would not be so bold and also if the adults are not suspicious in turn it brings a false sense of security in the child that they are safe with this person and what they do is acceptable.

PROCESS OF GROOMING:

Step One: Gain Access:

If an abuser does not already have access to a child (like most family offenders do) they will often target children that are uneducated about sexual abuse, shy, insecure, or children considered 'troubled'. They first want access, trust, and ability to control.

They will analyse the parent/ child bond as well as an opportunity to spend time alone with the child. They may target any of the situations such as a grandparent babysitting or transporting a child between activities, coaching a child, or including a child for play dates or sleepovers with children in the offender's home.

Step Two: Gain Trust:

If the abuser is a family member, trust friend, or authority figure - they may already have the child's trust and therefore do not need to build upon a relationship.

The last thing they want is to be suspected or questioned. They are often friendly, helpful, or feign a romantic interest in the child or the youngster to gain access.

They often gain or already have gained the trust of the child through the relationship established with other adults the child trust. They then work to build a relationship with a child, possibly showing the child with attention, affection, and gifts or special favours/ treatment to make the child feel comfortable and invest in the relationship.

Step Three: Breakdown of Boundaries:

Abusers can take weeks to months before sexually abusing their victims. They often 'test' personal boundaries over time to gauge the child's response as well as that of the parents, such as — did the child tell the parent; if the child told, did the parents express concern or did they believe the child?

If the child is not educated about how their bodies work and what sexual abuse is, it is easier for an offender to portray sexual interaction as normal or a learning experience. When parents say things like "if someone hurts you, tell me" it can confuse a child who doesn't find sexual abuse painful, but pleasurable. This may compound feelings of embarrassment and disconnection with those that would protect them.

Step Four: Maintain Control

Child sexual offenders seek abusive relationships that will last for an extended period of time. They will exercise a variety of tactics to make sure the child does not tell anyone.

Abusers usually make the child believe that they are the only ones who care about them, such that the child may fear losing the relationship.

They may also threaten children with harm. The threats may be physical, a loss of a family member, pet etc The abuser may make the child believe that it is the child's fault and/ or their parents' fault and will be ashamed of them.

The child may simply be afraid of not being believed, or disrupting the family and/ or creating a 'problem' when the family is already under stress.

DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE BY THE CHILD

In relation to disclosure it needs to be focussed that not all cases are disclosed because not all sexually abused children exhibit symptoms. Approximately, up to 40% of sexually abused children are asymptomatic. Children may

not give a detailed or clear report of the abuse. Children mostly give only hints. The first hint will be followed by a bigger hint. Only if the child feels confident that the first hint was received and dealt well. The hint is usually an indication that something has happened to them and may not directly mean that sexual abuse has happened. They may test us for the reaction to their first hint. Sometimes initial hints of disclosure are totally missed and as a result, a child may not receive the help needed.

The decision to disclose the happenings of the episodes of sexual abuse is influenced by complex multiple factors. Between 60–80% of CSA victims withhold disclosure suggesting that many children and adolescents endure prolonged victimisation and do not receive necessary therapeutic intervention. The concepts of barriers and facilitators of disclosure are still not that well understood. A study conducted during 2010 attempted an ecological analysis of child sexual abuse disclosure in which forty adult survivors of CSA were interviewed about their disclosure experiences to provide retrospective accounts of their childhood and adolescent abuse experiences and disclosure attempts. The study indicated that the age of onset of abuse had a significant impact on sexual abuse disclosure in this sample. The younger the child was when the abuse started, the more difficult was the disclosure. Obvious developmental constraints related to cognitive and verbal functions and recall ability hindered intentional disclosure. The families of survivors were largely described as chaotic, ruled by aggression, plagued by substance abuse, closed systems that were uncommunicative and socially isolated – all factors that silenced the child victims. Another contributor to non-disclosure was the presence of intimate partner violence, with the adult victim most often being the mother. Both women and men recalled being raised with attitudes that children do not count.

The child's decision to reveal the abuse depends on the depth and nature of the relationship with the abuser, age at which the first abuse happened, extent of physical force used, and the severity of abuse.

Mother is the most likely person in the family the child may disclose the incident of sexual abuse to; again it would depend on the child's expected response from the mother. Depending on the age of the child sometimes, the abuse details are first shared with a friend or a sibling. Very few children report abuses to authorities. Among the professionals teachers are most commonly disclosed to.

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