

Safeguarding Update



June 2019

1. Recognising grooming

Grooming is often discovered not disclosed - so how can teachers spot the signs?

Since the NSPCC successfully campaigned for a new law to make it illegal for adults to send sexual messages to children, over 5,000 online grooming offences have been recorded by police forces in England and Wales*. Anyone can groom another person - it doesn't matter whether they're the same age or much older, male or female. In many cases, children and young people know the person who is grooming them. It might be a neighbour, a coach or a family friend. And grooming doesn't just take place online. Children and young people may speak to people online who they then meet in person. Or they might be groomed by someone they know and stay in touch through text messages and social media. Any child or young person can be groomed, regardless of their background or family circumstances.

Grooming is by its very nature secretive. People who groom children and young people build up their trust over time and, often, they may groom the family as well. In so many cases, grooming is discovered and not disclosed. Children and young people may not speak out because they feel scared, embarrassed or ashamed. They may not even realise that what's happening to them is wrong.

Grooming is often discovered because someone else spots or hears something worrying - whether that's a friend, teacher, parent or other family member. So, if grooming is often discovered rather than disclosed, how can we empower teachers and other school staff to make sure they can recognise the signs and take action?

Watch out for unusual behaviour

Teachers have a tough job. Every year, you get to know a new intake of pupils into your school and your classes as well as juggling a demanding workload. It's a skill and a half, and I'm in awe of teachers' ability to do this. But it also makes you ideally placed to recognise when something is wrong. In my last blog, I talked about trusting your instincts when it comes to online safety. And it's just the same for grooming - or any other safeguarding issue.

If a child starts behaving in an unusual manner then you know this may be a cause for concern. These signs can often be obvious. For example a child who is normally quiet becomes much more outgoing (or vice versa), grades may drop or they might start using language that they wouldn't usually. But what about when the signs aren't obvious, how can teachers be aware of what's happening?

Be alert to smaller signs

In one case I've seen, a teacher discovered a young person was being groomed because she overheard a confrontational conversation between two friends. One girl had been sending explicit pictures to someone she had met online and her friend had found out. When the teacher talked to her about what she had heard, she discovered the pupil was being groomed by an older man.

Of course, teachers don't see what's happening outside of school. And it's all too easy to explain behaviour in other ways. So if a studious pupil is very tired in lessons, you might think that they'd been up late doing homework, or watching television. But it's also possible that they've been receiving messages from someone who is blackmailing or grooming them late at night. Or you might notice that a child who was really popular in the playground has become much more isolated. And it's these behaviour changes that are key to helping to spot when something is wrong.

get the help and support they need.

Our Keeping Children Safe Online elearning course gives you the knowledge and skills to understand

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Talk about anything worrying

If you do notice something that you're not sure about, talk to the young person. Mention to the tired pupil that you've noticed they seem tired. Ask the lone child in the playground if everything is ok. It's really hard for children and young people to come forward when something is wrong, even to a trusted adult. But by starting a conversation you're giving them an opportunity to speak out and, if they choose not to disclose or only share part of their experiences, you're reminding them that you're there if, or when, they are able to ask for help. Make sure you follow your school's safeguarding procedures, and speak to your nominated child protection lead about any concerns you have.

By being alert to any changes in behaviour and acting on any concerns that you may have, we can continue to ensure that grooming is discovered. And we can make sure that children and young people

Link: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2019/may/grooming-often-discovered-not-disclosed-how-can-teachers-spot-signs/>

2. Call for inquiry into abusive parents' access to children

At least four children have been killed by a parent in the past five years after a family court granted access. Dozens of parents have told the Victoria Derbyshire programme their abusive ex-partners were granted unsupervised contact with their child. The Ministry of Justice said a child's welfare was always the priority. "Where there is evidence of domestic abuse, the courts are bound by law to consider potential harm to the child and this overrides any presumption of parental involvement," an MoJ spokesman said.

'Toxic trio'

When parents separate and cannot agree arrangements for their children, a family court judge can make a legally-binding decision on contact - including whether visits to a mother or father should be supervised. The fundamental presumption in law is that it is in the best interests of the child to have contact with both parents. But it has led to the courts ordering children to have contact with an alleged or known violent ex-partner - including some convicted of rape, assault and drug offences, the BBC has learned from dozens of affected parents. Due to legal restrictions the BBC cannot always view family court documents to substantiate the claims made by parents. However, analysis of serious case reviews for England since 2014, shows four children have been killed during access granted by the family courts. It indicates that four further children had been sexually abused or seriously injured, or both.

The BBC has learned that 123 MPs from seven different parties have now come together to sign a letter to Justice Secretary David Gauke calling for an independent inquiry into the family courts "to establish the extent of the problem and if more fundamental reform is required".

Link: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48230618>