

SAFE and SMART

Keeping Children Safe Online

January 2025

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WARNING

The following is an important but sensitive topic which some may find distressing.

What is GROOMING?



As parents and carers the safety and well-being of children is our top priority, yet sometimes it feels that not a week goes by when the topic of grooming isn't in the media. It's an awful subject, but it's an important one to understand. In schools, children and young people are given a lot of education and awareness-raising about risks such as this, and as parents and carers we need to understand these risks to safeguard our children at home.



What is Grooming?

Grooming is a process where someone builds an emotional connection or sense of trust with a child or young person, often to exploit or manipulate them in some way. You may often hear the term in relation to **sexual exploitation**, but grooming can also involve recruitment into criminal activities (e.g. gangs) or radicalisation. The ultimate aim is to **control**, **manipulate**, or **abuse** the young person.

It can happen both **online** and **offline** and in many cases the person doing the grooming will invest time and energy in gaining a young person's trust which might include giving them attention, buying gifts, or giving them money.



What are the Tactics?

Offenders, whether their goal is sexual exploitation, gang involvement, or other forms of manipulation, will often follow a pattern designed to gain trust, break

down barriers, and create a sense of secrecy or loyalty. While each situation may differ slightly there are common tactics offenders use both online and in real life:

Building Trust and Emotional Connections

Friendliness and Flattery: Offenders often start by showing warmth, empathy, or understanding. They may shower the young person with compliments or take a keen interest in their hobbies and personal struggles.

Giving Gifts: From physical presents such as clothes or gadgets to online perks like game credits, these items create a sense of gratitude.

Offering Emotional Support: Offenders might position themselves as a confidant or mentor, especially if the child is dealing with loneliness, family conflict, or low self-esteem. For example if a young person posts online about feeling down or lonely, an offender might use this as a gateway to communicate.



Gradual Desensitisation and Normalisation

Slow Escalation: Conversations or interactions might start innocently (e.g., talking about shared interests) and then gradually shift to personal or inappropriate topics.

Normalising Harmful Behaviour: An offender may introduce risky behaviours—such as drug use, alcohol consumption, or explicit content—as if they are “normal” or “common.”

Exploit Curiosity: Children and teens naturally explore their identity and interests. Offenders leverage this curiosity to guide them into uncomfortable or dangerous territory.

Testing Boundaries

Incremental Requests: An offender may ask for small favours or small pieces of personal information first, then escalate to more private or risky requests (e.g., personal photos, revealing secrets).

Encouraging Secrecy: they may stress that parents “won’t understand,” or that “this must stay between us,” creating a hidden bond.

Manipulating Emotions: They may use guilt (“I’ve done so much for you”), threats of self-harm, or flattery (“You’re so mature for your age”) to control a child’s response.

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

Identifying Needs or Insecurities: Whether a young person feels misunderstood by peers or lacks emotional support at home, an offender may target these vulnerabilities.

Providing Solutions: They may offer to solve problems—providing money, protection, or even a sense of belonging (in the case of gang grooming).

Isolating the Child: By sowing distrust or friction between the child and others, the offender ensures they become the child’s main source of support or guidance.

Establishing Dependence

Emotional Dependence: Repeated praise or support can make the child feel they “owe” the offender or can’t manage without them.

Financial Dependence: If an offender provides regular gifts, money, or resources, the child may come to rely on it, making it harder to break free.

Threats and Blackmail: Once a child is dependent, an offender may use threats—such as sharing private photos or messages—to ensure continued compliance.



Online-Specific Tactics

Fake Identities or Catfishing: Offenders sometimes (but not always) pretend to be a peer (e.g., similar age, shared interests) or someone who “understands” them. They may use profile pictures and posts of another person (or AI generated) to appear to be younger or a similar age.

Private Messaging Apps: Moving conversations from public forums (such as games or social media) to private or encrypted apps reduces the likelihood of being monitored.

Exploiting “New Friend” Excitement: Children or teens often enjoy making new online friends; offenders use this excitement to quickly build a bond.

Love Bombing: Sending constant messages, compliments, or attention, especially when a child is online, to develop a fast emotional connection.



Real-Life Tactics

Gaining Access Through Social Circles: Offenders may befriend family members or other trusted adults (coaches, group leaders) to appear safe and credible.

Frequent One-on-One Contact: They may offer rides home, meet after school, or plan private meet-ups as “mentoring” or “just hanging out.”

Use of Drugs or Alcohol: Providing these substances creates a situation where a young person may feel indebted, less aware, or more easily controlled.

Gang Recruitment: In gang grooming, the approach might involve a mixture of threats (“We’ll protect you, but you owe us”) and promises of status, protection, or belonging.

What are the Signs?

Every situation is different but there are some common signs:

Online Signs

Secretive online activities: Your child might be closing tabs, switching screens, or hiding their phone when you enter the room.

Excessive time online: Late-night internet usage or sudden changes in screen-time habits may point to unusual conversations or connections.

New “friends” or contacts: They might mention new friends you’ve never heard of, especially ones who seem older or who your child can’t describe properly.

Receiving gifts or money: This might be virtual gifts such as online game credits, or physical items delivered discreetly.

Sudden changes in behaviour: They might seem withdrawn, anxious, or particularly defensive about certain online interactions.

Real-Life Signs

New, secretive relationships: A noticeable closeness with someone older or someone who exerts control or influence.

Unexplained gifts or money: Expensive items, cash, or other treats that your child can’t explain.

Isolation from family or friends: Offenders often encourage children to cut ties with trusted adults.

Uncharacteristic changes in mood or personality: Increased aggression, sadness, or anxiety.

Lying about whereabouts: Coming home late, disappearing for long periods, or lying about who they're with.



What Parents Should Know

Groomers are often skilled at manipulation. They can be patient and may spend weeks or even months developing a bond with a child.

It can happen to anyone. Children of any age, gender, and background can be targeted.

It's not always about physical abuse. Sometimes the aim is emotional or psychological control, exploitation in gangs, or involvement in illegal activities.

Online risks are complex. Social media, online games, messaging apps, and chat rooms are all potential platforms for groomers to contact children. You may often see online posts such as “The top 10 most dangerous apps” or something similar. This is misleading - where there is a method of communication, regardless of app, game or website, offenders will try to exploit this.

Children may not recognize the danger. They might see a groomer as a “friend” or someone who cares about them, especially if they are feeling lonely, misunderstood, or are seeking attention.

What Parents Can Do?

Keep communication open. Make sure your child knows they can talk to you about anything that happens—online or in person—without fear of punishment. Ask open-ended questions about their day, their friends, and any changes in their life. Ensure they know that they can speak to others, e.g. Nan, teacher, big sister etc.

Establish online boundaries. Agree on rules and expectations for internet usage—this might include where devices can be used, which apps are allowed, and who your child can communicate with.

Show interest in their digital world. Ask about the apps they use, the games they play, and the people they talk to. Encourage them to share their online experiences with you.

Educate your child on grooming tactics. Talk to them in an age-appropriate way about how some adults or older teens may try to befriend them with ulterior motives.

Encourage critical thinking. Teach them to be wary of strangers or even online “friends” who ask for personal information, send gifts, or want to meet secretly.

Use parental controls wisely. As well as parental features on phones, gaming devices and apps, consider installing software that monitors or filters content. This won't replace open communication, nor are parental controls a solution, but they can act as an extra safety measure.

Know the warning signs. Pay attention to changes in your child's behaviour, attitude, or relationships.

Trust your instincts. If something feels off, even if you're not sure what, discuss it with someone.

Seek professional help if necessary. If you suspect your child is being groomed or if you feel overwhelmed, reach out for help—whether through the school's safeguarding team, form tutor, police or a helpline such as [NSPCC](#), [CEOP](#), and [Childline](#).



WhatsApp

Hidden Chats

WhatsApp has been around since 2009. Originally developed by two ex-Yahoo employees it was bought by Facebook in 2014 for **US\$19 billion**.



It was originally designed to show someone's status in their phone contacts, but it quickly evolved into a messaging platform. As with all other platforms, WhatsApp has a minimum age requirement and these differ slightly around the world. For example, here in the UK the age requirement was 16, but was reduced in 2024 to 13 years of age.

Gradually over the years WhatsApp has introduced more and more features, and one of these features is hidden chats, otherwise known as Chat Lock.

What is Chat Lock

WhatsApp Chat Lock is a feature that lets you protect individual chats with a code or biometric authentication. It hides those conversations from the main chat list, so someone scanning your phone won't see them right away or at all. Essentially, it adds an extra layer of privacy to conversations you may want to keep hidden. Not only that, you can apply a unique code to your hidden chats and no-one will know that there are any hidden chats.

But Why?

There's only one reason - privacy. In an age where all manner of companies want our data, where there's potential for our devices to be stolen or hacked, people are becoming justifiably concerned and more very privacy aware.

Is Chat Lock a Concern?

Potentially yes. Consider the previous article about grooming. If an offender has established trust with a child or young person they may choose to communicate via WhatsApp for two reasons:

- WhatsApp is end-to-end encrypted, meaning that no-one, not even Meta, can see those messages, meaning that there is no automatic moderation which is designed to detect illegal activity (such as grooming and exploitation).
- Chat Lock provides an extra layer of privacy. If you regularly review your child's phone and they have locked their chats with a unique code, you won't know that chat exists unless they tell you or if you happen to see a notification (if they have notifications turned on).

Furthermore, by default any media (photos or images) received is automatically saved to the Photos app on the device. But this is not the case in hidden chats.

As children grow older there is a natural tendency to become more private, they may not want to share everything with their parents/carers. In many cases that's okay, it's natural, but there is a difference between privacy and secrecy. Secrecy suggests that they've got something to hide, which they don't want to or can't share with parents.

Where can I Find Further Information?





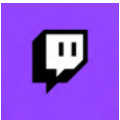


The feature differs slightly from device to device (e.g. Apple, Android, Mac, Windows). Have a look on the [WhatsApp FAQ](#) page for further details, the different devices are at the top of the page.



Common Apps

This is not an exhaustive list, but tends to be the more popular apps used by children and young people.

Age requirements are set within the terms and conditions of the app provider, don't be confused by ratings in the app stores which can be different.

App	Age	Comments
	13	Discord - is a voice, video and text chat app that's used by tens of millions of people aged 13+ to tap and hang out with communities or their friends. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	Instagram - is a photo and video sharing app where people can upload photos, videos and messages to share with others. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	Snapchat - is a very popular app that lets users swop pictures and videos (Snaps) with others which are meant to disappear after they are viewed. There is also a messaging feature. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	TikTok - is a social media app that allows users to create, watch and share short videos shot on mobile devices or webcams. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	Twitch - is where people come together to chat and interact live. Think YouTube, but it is live rather than pre-recorded. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	WhatsApp - is a messaging app which uses text, images, video and voice record features to connect with others. Parental settings can be found HERE
	18	Reddit - is a network of communities (called subreddits) where people can share information, their interests and hobbies. Reddit is an 18+ app, there are no parental controls.