

## Understanding Grooming in Sports

### Why It's Important

Everyone involved in sports should know about sexual grooming behaviour to help prevent children from being sexually harmed.

### How It Happens

Sports organisations and clubs can be places where adults might target and groom children. Grooming is when someone manipulates others, especially children, to create opportunities for abuse and avoid being caught. Child-on-child abuse can also occur.

### Who are Child Sexual Abusers

Child sexual abusers can come from any part of society and often seem respectable and trustworthy. Research shows that most abusers are known to the child and may hold a position of trust.

### Types of Grooming

Grooming is a core part of many cases of sexual abuse, but children and young people can also be groomed for radicalisation or criminal exploitation.

### Recognising Grooming

Accepting that abuse can happen in any setting, including sports clubs, is the first step to prevention.



### How Grooming Happens

Child abuse usually is not just a one-time thing. To keep children safe, we need to understand that most child sexual abusers create a power imbalance to control the child. They often make the child believe they are in a "relationship" or make them too scared to tell anyone.

Grooming can also include parents and families, in order to gain trust and access to the child.

Secrecy is key to the abuse continuing, and children often do not realise what is happening until it's too late. However, any reasonable grounds for concern should be reported to the statutory immediately.

### Tactics Used by Child Sexual Abusers

- ➔ **Seeking Access:** Looking for roles with regular contact with children and organisations with unclear policies and procedures.
- ➔ **Testing the Culture:** Breaking small rules to see if they are challenged. If left unchallenged, leads to breaches escalating.
- ➔ **Building Trust:** Giving advice, attention, or gifts to build relationships.
- ➔ **Exploiting Power:** Using authority to control and isolate the child.
- ➔ **Keeping Secrets:** Using secrets to control and frighten the child.
- ➔ **Manipulation:** Using reverse psychology or strategic withdrawal to trick the child into thinking they are in control of the situation.
- ➔ **Sextortion:** Using online platforms to manipulate and threaten the child.
- ➔ Showing sexually explicit material to children, which is often a feature of the 'grooming' process by perpetrators of abuse.

## Finkelhor's model of sexually abusive behaviour

Finkelhor's model of sexually abusive behaviour describes the stages that a child sexual abuser moves through to abuse a child. It comprises four preconditions leading to the sexual abuse of a child:

1. Sexual motivation (wanting to abuse)
2. Overcoming internal inhibitions (against acting on that motivation)
3. Overcoming external inhibitors (to committing sexual abuse)
4. Undermining or overcoming the child's resistance to the sexual abuse.

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
<b>Sexual motivation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strong urges or desires</li><li>• Thinking about something or wanting to do something</li><li>• Reinforced by fantasies</li></ul>	<b>Overcoming internal inhibitions against acting on that motivation – Giving themselves permission</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Giving in to the urge or desire</li><li>• Making excuses</li><li>• Justifications</li><li>• Overcoming conscience</li></ul>	<b>Overcoming external impediments to committing sexual abuse and creating opportunity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How you go about engaging in the behaviour</li><li>• Grooming others</li><li>• Gaining access to a victim</li><li>• Creating situations where abuse can take place</li><li>• Reducing the chances of the abuse being discovered or reported, or of disclosures being believed</li></ul>	<b>Undermining or overcoming the child's resistance to the sexual abuse</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Getting the victim to be compliant</li><li>• Threats of harm or force</li><li>• Bribes and treats</li><li>• Befriending</li></ul>



By knowing how child sexual offenders behave, we can reduce grooming risks in sports environment.

## Some steps to help:

- **Safe Recruitment** - Check references and backgrounds of volunteers and staff. This prevents those with a history of harming children from getting access. It shows the club is serious about safeguarding.
- **Codes of Conduct** - Have clear rules. Child sexual abusers often start by breaking small rules to test the system. Strong codes of conduct help challenge these early breaches and prevent escalation.
- **Safeguarding Education** - Train staff and volunteers on acceptable behaviour. Ensure everyone understands what is and is not acceptable.
- **Clear Reporting** - Make sure everyone knows how to report concerns. Handle reports properly and confidentially. However, any reasonable grounds for concern should be reported to the statutory immediately.
- **Listening to Children** - and their opinions in decisions and hearing what they have to say also means they are more likely to speak up if they have concerns. Discuss acceptable behaviour to give them the confidence to share concerns. Do not promise to keep secrets, but you will maintain confidentiality. Concerns must be reported.
- **Online Safety** - Have policies for safe online communication, especially if using social media to contact children or parents.
- **Risk Assessment of Harm** - The risk assessment considers the potential for harm to come to children whilst they are in the relevant organisation's care. The risk assessment of harm informs the development of safeguarding policies and procedures to manage the risk identified.



## Signs of sexual grooming

**In a sports environment, some signs a child is being abused may include:**

- sudden changes in participation
- avoiding club sessions or training
- changes in behaviour such as becoming withdrawn
- fear of certain places or areas
- fear of certain people

**Other signs may be more noticeable away from the sports environment, such as:**

- developing a problem with their mental health and wellbeing
- secretive use of phones and tablets
- having unexplained gifts
- alcohol or drug misuse
- having a much older 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'
- developing sexual health problems or inappropriate sexualised knowledge



## Further information

Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Bill 2023

Sport Ireland Safeguarding Guidance Document for Children and Young People in Sport

Children First Act 2015

David Finkelhor's Model 1984

