

# Online grooming: spot the warning signs

Any child might become vulnerable to online grooming. But as parents, there are steps we can take to prevent and address this serious crime.

## What is grooming?

Grooming is when someone builds a trusting relationship with a child in order to sexually abuse them. This can happen in person, online, or both.

The abuser might be a stranger or someone the child knows.

Some abusers groom their victims for a long time, while others move very quickly.

Abusers might be any age or background. They might target girls or boys, young children or teens. They might use their real identity or pretend to be someone else.

Online abusers might persuade, trick or threaten children into sending sexual pictures or videos or meeting up in person.

## Why don't children tell?

Abusers manipulate children into keeping quiet. Children might keep quiet because:

- they think the person grooming them is a friend, boyfriend or girlfriend
- they enjoy the attention at first, not realising there's a dark side
- they are afraid their parents will punish them, eg. by taking their tech away
- they feel embarrassed, guilty or scared.

## What are the warning signs?

Children who have been groomed online can show signs such as:

- withdrawing from friends or family
- using devices in secret or refusing to talk about what's happening online
- changing their habits online – eg. going online much more

- mood changes – eg. anxiety, sadness, anger
- unexplained money, gifts, gaming credits or e-vouchers
- problems at school
- giving up the hobbies they used to enjoy
- using inappropriate sexual language or behaviours.

A child who shows these problems has not necessarily been groomed – there might be another problem. Either way, it's important for parents to step in.

Parents can also learn the signs that someone might be trying to groom a child online. These include:

- asking a child personal questions early on – eg. their phone number or school
- claiming to be a celebrity or a friend of someone the child knows
- bombarding the child with messages
- contacting the child using several different platforms
- pretending to share the child's interests
- trying to move the chat to a more private platform with video and photo options
- asking the child who else is around or which part of the house they are in
- asking the child to keep secrets from family or friends
- offering the child gifts, such as gaming credits or e-vouchers
- offering to help the child become famous and popular – eg. as a model or a social media influencer
- giving the child over-the-top compliments
- pressuring the child to send pics or videos or meet in person
- asking the child questions about romantic or sexual topics
- using sexual language or sending the child sexually explicit material.

Learn more about grooming from [Think U Know](#) and [eSafety](#).

### **How can parents help to keep kids safe?**

It's important to talk regularly with our children about what's happening online and explore the games and social media they enjoy.

Families can set 'house rules' about tech use. These might include:

- use tech in open spaces with other people around – eg. the living room
- choose high privacy settings for social media and gaming. See the [eSafety Guide](#)
- stick to socialising with friends you know and trust face-to-face
- don't give away information (including in photos) that would allow someone to figure out where you live, work or study

- turn off GPS tracking on any apps or devices that don't really need it
- if playing multiplayer games with a chat function, only talk about the game. Consider using speakers so parents can overhear
- learn how to block and report abusive behaviour – e.g. to the website where it happened and the [eSafety Commissioner](#).

We can warn our children about the sort of behaviours that are inappropriate online and be clear with our children that:

- if something went wrong online, we would want our kids to tell us. We would focus on finding a solution and keeping them safe
- if something makes you uncomfortable – online or offline – it's always OK to say 'no' or walk away
- help is always available. Encourage kids to name trusted adults they could talk to and remind them of these [helplines](#).

#### **If a child has been groomed, what should I do?**

- Reassure the child that you're glad you found out and they are not to blame.
- Report it. For guidelines, see the [Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation](#). If someone is in immediate danger, always call triple zero (000).
- Get expert [advice](#) about how to preserve the evidence. (Saving intimate images of children, even as evidence, can be illegal.)
- Get help from a trusted GP, school wellbeing team, sexual assault counselling service, or a helpline such as [Kids Helpline](#) 1800 55 1800, [Dolly's Dream Support Line](#) 0488 881 033, or [Parentline](#) in your state or territory.

