

GROOMING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

How Children are Recruited for Sex, County Lines,
Terrorism and Much More



Letise Sampson

Grooming in the 21st Century: How Children are Recruited for Sex, County Lines and Terrorism

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Biography: Letise Sampson

Anybody can be a groomer regardless of age, gender, culture and position of authority. Never has there been a time we have to be more vigilant and watchful for our young people.

My earliest encounter with grooming was at around the age of 5 years old – the age of a typical greedy child, always wanting sweet treats. Now, one day I wanted some extra biscuits but this was on the top shelf of the cupboard which was unreachable; at the time we had a helper who looked after the house and every time I wanted an extra biscuit, she would request a big kiss on the lips. At that time, I didn't think anything of it or thought it was wrong. Now I am older and have young children aged 5 years myself, the thought of an adult doing the same thing to my child would be infuriating.

At age 16, while I was at college, older gang members always congregated at the front of the college. There was a particular older gang member who was known as one of the biggest fraudsters in the area and dangerous. On various occasions, he would park his £60k Porsche sports car outside the college to poach the young students and entice them into a life of fast money, jewellery, fraud and criminality. There were a few friends who were enticed and entrapped into this alluring lifestyle of material wealth and being the “top boy” in the community, to the point they even quit college to pursue this facade. To put this into context, both of my friends, at age 17, were now driving a brand new Audi TT and Mercedes C Class Coupe and they never once worked a legitimate job for a day in their lives.

This lifestyle resulted in a knock-on effect of my friends being constantly worried about being caught by the police. The money they made attracted older gang members who saw them as easy prey for robberies. These multiple pressures caused my friends many mental health issues including paranoia and OCD. One of them sadly committed suicide (this is documented in greater detail in the books ***Getting to Grips with Gangs*** and ***Getting a Grasp on Youth Mental Health***). The most interesting thing about the situation was the actual guy who was grooming these young men was a “ghost” meaning he never showed his face in public and never got his hands dirty. Yet I watched all my friends come to their demise because of him.

When I was 18, a 17 year old friend asked me to take her to a house as she needed to talk to someone. She didn't explain what it was all about but clearly it was troubling her. I agreed and when we arrived, she asked that I wait in the car. She knocked on the door and a middle aged man around 50 year old man came out; he closed the door, looking confused, and asked my friend "what are you doing here at 9pm".

All I remember was the words of my friend saying, "I forgive you for what you did to me." The man then fell down on his knees and started crying, saying he has a wife and kids and not to tell. She walked away. From what I understood from a brief conversation after, he was a family friend who sexually abused her when providing after-school tuition. We never spoke about it ever again but that stayed in my memory and tormented me as a young man because I always felt I should have said something, done something or even reported it to the police. But I had to respect her wishes. For privacy reasons I will not divulge more of that story.

These and other experiences raised my awareness of sexual predators and I began to notice more and more that young females were being groomed and sexually exploited during their teens.

I can't document all of these cases in this book but the point is that as parents, carers, guardians, teachers and even peers, it is imperative we all play a part in raising awareness and safeguarding our young people.

Predators can attack in any shape or disguise; from your local pastor, to family members, to the social media guy right down to your own 'best friend.' This book will expose all.

This is dedicated to all the young people who have been abused and who never had the courage to speak up about it.

Introduction

Child grooming is not a new evil but changes in society and technology over the past decade have changed the social landscape to such an extent that the old ways of talking about grooming and 'stranger danger' need an upgrade.

Since the turn of the century we have seen the birth and exponential growth of online communities and mobile apps. We have also seen a fundamental shift in the notion of what is private and what is public. Children and teens now love to record their dances in front of an iPhone camera; chat to friends via WhatsApp; send photos of themselves using Instagram; post videos on YouTube; livestream on Facebook – the variety is almost endless.

At the same time, we must recognise that grooming still occurs in the 'real world' and that the broad pattern of techniques hasn't changed that much. An abuser can still walk up to your child by the school gates or in the park but they can also now message them through Snapchat or WhatsApp, meet up with them on an internet chatroom or a Discord server. They can slip underneath the safety nets around Instagram, TikTok or even kids' games like Roblox.

As you will see, some of the tactics groomers now use have taken advantage of technology. Catfishing, bulk messaging and sexting are all weapons in the groomer's arsenal while the everyday smartphone can now become an instrument of terror as part of organised grooming and sex trafficking operations.

The good news is that we can educate our children to be aware of the warning signs but it is a race against time and we all have a duty to be vigilant. As you will discover, at a certain point along the grooming path things become a lot harder for the young people themselves to untangle. The damage that grooming can do is severe and often lifelong.

We must help our children to become aware of the risks and to protect themselves. We need them to know what to do if they – or their friends – are ever in trouble.

This book brings together everything you need to know in one place.

Some of the key issues we focus on are:

- ✓ Grooming techniques and warning signs
- ✓ Online grooming
- ✓ The short and long-term consequences of grooming
- ✓ Grooming for sexual exploitation
- ✓ County Lines and gang grooming
- ✓ Radicalisation and grooming for terror
- ✓ How to talk to your children about grooming
- ✓ Preventative strategies
- ✓ Staying safe online
- ✓ Building healthy relationships

How to use this book

This is a 2020 Dreams publication. 2020 Dreams tackles those tough issue – like youth violence, gangs and grooming – that all of us find difficult to talk about. We raise awareness through education, training, life coaching and mentoring. Please see **www.2020dreams.org.uk** for more details.

This book is designed to help parents, caregivers, teachers and community leaders to recognise the signs of grooming and take preventative action or to disrupt and react appropriately to ongoing or suspected grooming.

It will show you the common patterns that are the hallmark of grooming behaviour while challenging the myths and stereotypes that can blind us from spotting what is in front of our noses.

For Parents:

- ✓ Real life case studies.
- ✓ Guidance for improving communication at home.
- ✓ Practical advice for preventing and reacting to grooming.

For Young People:

- ✓ Real facts and stories about grooming so you can recognise when someone is trying to groom you.
- ✓ Hints and tips to help you stay safe online
- ✓ Guidance on what to do if you or someone you know are being groomed.

For the Wider Community:

- ✓ Based on the latest knowledge and reports.
- ✓ Builds awareness about grooming techniques and risk factors.
- ✓ Practical advice for recognising young people at risk and providing help.

So, how many young people are being groomed?

In September 2019, a Freedom of Information request to police forces across the UK revealed that there had been 4,373 reported offences of 'sexual communication with a child' between April 2018 and April 2019. The previous year, the figure had been 3,217.

This is undoubtedly the tip of the iceberg in cases of sexual grooming alone. And as this book will argue, this narrow focus on sexual grooming leaves out other types of grooming such as County Lines training and terror recruitment (radicalisation).

We need to both broaden our understanding of what grooming is as well as focus on the minute details that can help keep our children – and other vulnerable young people – safe from predators.

To those who may feel that their child is somehow immune from grooming, I leave you the following words of warning from Lorin LaFave, the mother of Breck Bednar whose harrowing story is told later in this guide:

“It may be one in a million but you don't want to be that one – because there's nothing worse.”

CHAPTER 2: What is Grooming?

Rather than treat different forms of grooming individually, this book, I believe uniquely, brings them all together under one umbrella.

We must understand that despite their outward differences, convincing a young male to pledge his allegiance to an extremist terror group (or a cult); persuading a young woman to send nude pictures via a webcam and training a teenager from inner city London how to run a County Lines operation in the countryside all use similar techniques.

If we can understand the common techniques groomers use to ensnare their victims, we can more easily devise anti-grooming strategies that can be rolled across the country and adapted to different contexts.

So, what is grooming?

According to the NSPCC, grooming is when:

“Someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them.”

Dr Stines of The Recovery Expert offers a similar definition:

“A manipulative process used by a ... predator for the purpose of creating a sense of trust with a targeted person prior to the act of actual victimisation.”

However, grooming also has a less sinister meaning such as when a young person is being groomed to become a talented singer or actor. The common element here is the establishment of trust and the process of training or preparing the young person for a role.

This detail may seem unimportant but if we can teach our children to always ask the question: 'what does this person want?' they might become aware of a problem sooner.

Grooming versus Bullying

How is grooming different to bullying? It's a good question and there is a lot of overlap.

The government defines bullying as behaviour that is:

- ✓ Repeated
- ✓ Intended to hurt someone, and
- ✓ Often aimed at certain groups

Grooming is usually more subtle because it is necessary to build trust with the victim. A groomer may not be setting out to hurt their victim although that is the inevitable result.

Having said that, manipulative forms of bullying can resemble grooming and some grooming behaviours, especially those used in the later stages, are just like those used by the playground bully – so the boundaries are blurred.

CHAPTER 3: The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

How can you spot a potential groomer? What do they look like? How do they behave?

Spotting a Groomer

Unfortunately, picking out a groomer is not an easy task. Groomers be of any gender, ethnic background or sexual orientation and can range in age from teenagers to the elderly.

Are there clues that a groomer might have nefarious intentions? It is wise to find out as much as you can about the personal history of anyone who is in regular close contact with a child or teen. Do they have a history of lying about details of their life? Has there ever been suspicion around their conduct?

Some jailed groomers have even been found to have had previous convictions but these are often only revealed during their trial. Others have led apparently blameless lives.

A groomer can be either a stranger or a person known to the target. There are cases of teachers, religious leaders, sports coaches, celebrities, counsellors, scout masters, health professionals, police officers, boat captains and mentors who have groomed children.

The social media and tech revolution has led to the establishment of YouTube and gaming celebrities and some of these have been jailed for grooming their fans. In at least one horrific case, a teen gamer groomed and murdered a younger teenager.

Teens and children might also be groomed by peers, family friends and even family members.

The importance of context

While acknowledging that **potentially** anyone could be a groomer, it is important to also understand the role of context. In some areas, due to cultural and demographic factors, members of some groups may be over-represented in the groomer and victim populations. This is a controversial area and facing this issue can spill over into destructive stereotyping.

The focus should be on understanding why grooming arises in certain contexts rather than demonising particular groups.

It also risks creating blind spots which are exploited by savvy criminals. For example, drug gang groomers have been targeting girls and grammar school pupils as they know that the stereotypical image of a County Lines drug runner is a young, poorly educated teenage boy.

The dynamics of power

In most cases of grooming, there is a clear power difference between the groomer and victim. This power can manifest in different ways:

- ✓ **The power of authority.** A groomer may be in a position where they are expected to control aspects of the child's behaviour (e.g. as a teacher, coach, mentor, doctor, etc.)
- ✓ **The power of experience.** Groomers are usually older than their victims and have more life experience.
- ✓ **The power of personality.** Depending on their personality, the groomer may be laid back and persuasive, dominant and coercive or a mixture. They will often adapt their approach depending on the situation. For example, an older man may flatter a teen girl with romantic gestures but become violent and controlling once they have taken them away from a place of safety.
- ✓ **The power of knowledge.** This is a particularly dangerous form of power. Once the groomer has personal information about their victim, they can use this to threaten them into conforming. If the knowledge is in the form of a physical asset (e.g. a nude photograph), this power is even greater.
- ✓ **The power of resources.** Young people can be attracted to those they see as wealthier or connected than them. The use of gifts, money and job opportunities to bribe victims is a common grooming tactic.

Peer-to-Peer Grooming

Peer grooming can be thought of as peer pressure but with an ulterior motive that goes beyond the normal process of individual development. Peer grooming can be particularly effective because it blends the power of authority with the power of identification.

It is difficult for an adult to gain the trust of a child or teen they want to groom, particularly if there is no existing relationship. On the other hand, a child will often bond with someone of their own age, especially if they respect them.

In gang culture, elders may recruit youngsters to buddy up with a target. Often they will be dressed in cool clothes and trainers and will talk positively about hanging out with their older friends.

Another popular variant of peer-to-peer grooming is when an older groomer hides behind a young avatar online. This can disarm the natural wariness a child might have about being approached by an adult online. Later, when a relationship has been established, the groomer may drop the disguise (“I thought a pretty girl like you would be scared off by an older guy like me so I pretended to be 15 to get to know you better.”)

By their fruits shall they be known

There may be no clear 'groomer demographic' but there are typical patterns of behaviour that can indicate an intention to groom. I will cover these in depth in the chapter on grooming techniques but here are some broad brush behaviours to be on the watch for:

- ✓ Offering to improve your/your child's prospects for no apparent reason (unexpected job offers, extra unpaid tuition, free gifts, etc.)
- ✓ Lying about power and influence. A groomer will want to present themselves as someone who can open doors.
- ✓ Insist on tracking and monitoring 'for safety and security.'
- ✓ Attempts to isolate. This might start small (e.g. a lift home from school) to establish trust but escalate to longer trips where the real victimisation can happen. There may also be an attempt to socially isolate the victim by turning them against their friends and family members.
- ✓ Unconventional beliefs or behaviours

CHAPTER 4: Can we Recognise a Victim?

Are some people more vulnerable to being groomed than others? Are there any groups of people who need additional protection from being groomed?

Recognising the victim

Groomers have been known to target boys and girls from single digit ages up to their late teens. Any child from any background can be groomed but some children are in a more vulnerable situation than others.

These include:

- ✓ young people living in care, especially in unregulated accommodation
- ✓ people with learning disabilities
- ✓ young people living in chaotic homes and affected by neglect, substance abuse, domestic violence, crime, etc.)
- ✓ young people with mental health issues

Some of these children will be eligible for preventative support from the NSPCC's In Ctrl service. See our chapter on 'What to Do' for more information on NSPCC children's services.

There is likely to be a difference in the channels through which different demographics are reached. For example, Instagram has a slightly higher number of female user whereas Discord (a gaming chat app) has a male bias.

In most cases, the target of a groomer will be someone younger than themselves as it is the increased power, knowledge and experience that comes with age that is key to developing the abusive dynamic.

Having said that, older people can be groomed as can vulnerable adults. Peer-to-peer grooming can also take place whereby trust is based on shared identity rather than respect for power. It could also be argued that some forms of manipulative domestic abuse are identical to grooming although it is rarely referred to in that way.

Behavioural risk factors for grooming

Rather than looking at demographics, it can help to focus on the behaviours that put some young people at more risk than others.

Since a growing proportion of grooming happens online, there are certain practices that put young people more at risk of being targeted. These include:

- ✓ Using non age-appropriate websites and apps
- ✓ Having regular, unsupervised access to a computer or device
- ✓ Using chat apps or private channels to communicate with online friends
- ✓ Having access to a webcam
- ✓ Posting content or accessing content that implies low self-esteem (e.g. posting about being depressed and suicidal or viewing self-harm content). Children with low self-esteem are seen as easier to manipulate.

Of course, some children are simply unlucky enough to be connected to a groomer either through their family or wider circle (e.g. school, sports clubs, community groups, etc.) This type of opportunist grooming is arguably the most difficult of all to recognise and tackle.

It is more difficult to isolate character traits that might make one child more vulnerable than another. An apparently 'streetwise' kid may be less trusting of others' motives yet be more adventurous and willing to push the boundaries there to protect them. Others may be very cautious yet fail to spot the warning signs in front of them (e.g. inappropriate approaches from an adult they know).

Local patterns of abuse

As clarified in the chapter on profiling abusers, there may be cultural and demographic factors that lead to victims from one community or identity group being victimised more frequently than others. For example, the profile of a victim in the inner city areas of London is likely to be different to that of a northern town and different again to that of a village in the Cotswolds. There can also be cultural factors which lead to some groups of young people being under-represented as victims.

For example, a 2013 report from the Sikh Awareness Society found that hundreds of Sikh girls had been groomed and abused over the previous five years, some as young as nine. According to police sources, many of these cases go unreported as victims and their families refuse to talk due to the sensitive issue of family honour.

In Sikh society, it is seen as critical for a woman to be a virgin when they get married. Sexual exploitation therefore puts incredible pressure on the families who may forbid the victim from talking to the police and may even take them abroad to escape the shame.

This not only hampers the victim's recovery but can lead them to think they are responsible for the situation. This plays into the hands of groomers. An ex-groomer admitted that Sikh girls were seen as 'easy targets' because they wouldn't tell anyone about their abuse. This can lead to a vicious circle of hidden exploitation.

One 15 year-old Sikh girl was under the control of a groomer for two years and sold for sex to many abusers. Her groomer used the classic technique of taking and retaining obscene images of the girl to blackmail her. When she finally plucked up the courage to tell her mother, she was forbidden from telling the police and told to keep the details of the abuse secret from her father.

The police have been criticised for failing to proactively investigate many cases of Sikh grooming with cultural sensitivity cited as one reason for their lack of action.

This is a very controversial area but it is critical that people look at the statistical patterns and draw conclusions based on academic sociological research rather than sensationalist media headlines.

The national shame of unregulated accommodation for children

It is natural to assume that young people in care are placed in fully regulated care homes but shocking reports in 2019 discovered that large numbers of children were being housed in private accommodation, some of which was completely unregulated.

This clearly puts them at a huge risk of grooming and exploitation of all kinds.

Following the report, new government legislation is being introduced to stop local authorities from housing children in this way. Local authorities have blamed government cuts for the situation.

Warning signs

There are behavioural clues that can suggest a child is being groomed or could be vulnerable to it. These include:

- Revealing they are going to leave school and 'have plans' to run an online enterprise
- Talking in glowing terms about a friend or online contact
- Obsession with or fear of accessing the internet
- Asking to spend a lot of time at friends' houses
- Displaying extremist or unconventional beliefs

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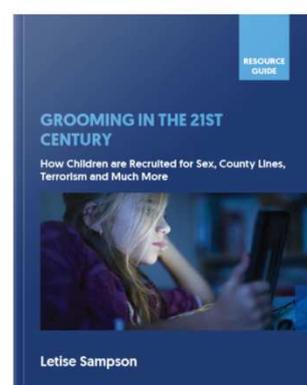
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