

THE GROOMING PROCESS

The following information is excerpted from the book *Identifying Child Molesters: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse by Recognizing the Patterns of the Offenders*, Carla Van Dam, PHD, The Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press, 2001. This book is an excellent source of information, and a summary of the research to date on the issue of identification of child molesters. It should be used with caution, however, and only with direction from qualified professionals, to avoid overreaction to some of the information in the book. The following is a brief summary of information about the grooming process.

In this summary, the molester is referred to in the male gender solely for ease of reference, given the reality that a vast majority of child molesters are male.

The Grooming Process

Generally, studies show that child molesters go through a “grooming” process, which can sometimes take months or years, in an effort to facilitate their molestations. The grooming process generally involves the following elements:

- **Sexual attraction to children:** This is a pre-existing condition in the molester, and can occur for many different reasons.
- **Justification of interest:** The molester often goes through a psychological process of justifying the attraction to children. This is described further below. Dr. Lamb described this as a process of breaking down the molester’s own psychological boundaries to allow the molestation to occur.
- **Grooming of adult community:** Often the molester will go through a process of getting the adult community that surrounds the child to accept and even welcome the molester’s involvement with the child. This is also described further below.
- **Grooming of child:** This is a process the molester goes through to break down the child’s resistance to sexual activity and to engage the child in the activity.

Justification

- This process of justifying the behavior is sometimes called neutralization. This is the psychological effort the molester goes through to justify the behavior to himself, and to break down any emotional barrier in himself which would prevent him from acting upon the sexual attraction to children.
- Denial of injury: The molester denies to himself, and perhaps to others, that any injury to the child could occur. The molester tells himself things like “This is my way of showing love to the child, I don’t want to hurt the child.” Many molesters lead themselves to believe that they are helping the child by showing love.

- Denial of victimization: The molester also denies that the child is a victim, instead choosing to view the child as actively wanting to engage in sexual activity.
- Condemnation of dissension: Many molesters actively argue against any societal view that child abuse is wrong. This is the role taken by the North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) referred to by Dr. Lamb.
- More enlightened viewpoint: Molesters will often take the position that their view is in fact the more enlightened view, as NAMBLA has done.

Grooming of The Adult Community

Child molesters will then ingratiate themselves with the adult community surrounding the child (*in the family with parents/guardians and extended family members; in the church community with priests, deacons, lay leaders, and other parishoners*), and break down any barriers that exist to access to the child. This includes exhibiting behaviors such as:

- Friendliness
- Ingratiating activity such as doing favors, helping out when no one has asked for help, etc.
- Targeting vulnerable families, such as those with alcohol problems, or single mothers

Grooming Children

The child molester will then groom a particular child using techniques which:

- Choose the most vulnerable child
- Engage the child in peerlike activities (playing with the children, playing games, etc.)
- Desensitization of child to touching (see below);
- Isolating the child; and
- Making the child feel responsible and thus less likely to disclose the abuse.

A Vulnerable Child

A vulnerable child, and thus a child more likely to be a target of abuse, would have one of the following characteristics:

- Needy (and thus vulnerable to positive attention)
- Quiet (and thus less likely to tell)
- Craves attention (and thus vulnerable to attention)

- Younger (less likely to understand or tell)
- Picked on by other children (and thus needing a friend)
- Low self esteem (and thus vulnerable to the positive reinforcement of the molester)
- Trusting (and thus less likely to understand the danger)
- Compliant (and thus vulnerable to an adult telling them it is okay)
- Eager to please (vulnerable to engaging in activity if they are told it is pleasing to the adult)
- Single mother (thus the child generally needs attention and the mother is grateful for the help)
- Unsupervised (and thus vulnerable to the attention of the molester).

Desensitization

The molester will often go through a process of desensitizing the child to the touch of the molester by engaging in the following types of activity:

- Tickling games;
- Spinning children in the air;
- Roughhousing;
- Wrestling;
- Piggy back rides;
- Having children sit on their lap or snuggle up next to them;
- Physical-picking up, carrying child, using this as an opportunity to test the child's reaction to touch;
- Testing child's reaction slowly---if the child balks at the touch the molester will back off and continue the grooming process
- Testing whether child will tell or will keep a 'secret'---if the child tells, the molester will know to move to another child.

Of course, there may be very innocent explanations for many of the activities noted above. This list is intended only to generally describe the process of grooming that may be engaged in by a child molester.