

Online grooming

 This fact sheet includes information for parents and carers about online grooming and how to get help.

What is online grooming?

Online grooming is when an adult makes online contact with someone under the age of 16 with the intention of establishing a relationship to **enable their sexual abuse**. The offence occurs in the communication phase so no physical contact need ever occur for police to step in and investigate.

How does it work?

Offenders can use a variety of tactics to groom children. Some may be sophisticated using multiple platforms and multiple identities. Others will simply contact as many children as possible, hoping some will **give in to their demands**, while some may only target a single child.

When grooming a child, an offender is often looking to elicit sexual photos/videos or facilitate meeting in person.

Law enforcement has seen examples of **children being groomed to produce online content** in exchange for 'likes', free products, 'modelling' contracts, or in extreme cases to offend.



Research by the **Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation** (accce.gov.au/research) identified a number of myths and misconceptions relating to the nature and risk of online child sexual exploitation including that online grooming was a slow process which would take months or years, meaning there would be time to notice the signs.

Where does it happen?

Online grooming can take place on interactive platforms including instant messaging apps, social media, gaming sites, emails and in chatrooms. **Offenders use these as a gateway to initiate contact with a child**, and will then often direct children to continue chatting with them on other platforms with image sharing capabilities to elicit photos, video content or establish meetings.

Many parents and carers may not be aware that chat functions appear on several popular online games, applications and social networking platforms. There have been many instances where **online child sex offenders have used 'in game' chat as a gateway** to access children.

It is important to know that all websites, apps or games have the **potential to be misused or cause harm**, however, they also have the potential to be positive, and foster creativity, problem solving skills, socialisation or even just downtime for a young person.

By focusing on educating children and young people can be equipped with the **knowledge and tools to navigate these issues**, while using the internet safely.



Tips to stay safe

- **Start an open discussion** with your child about their online interactions, which platforms they use and how they use them.
- If you are unsure about the features in the games or apps your child is using, do some research, download it yourself and review, or better yet, **sit down with your child and ask them to show you how it works.**
- Consider whether having the 'chat' function enabled on apps and games is necessary. If your child is playing games with voice chat, consider **enabling the speakers so you can monitor discussions.**
- Being aware of the personal information your child could be sharing online is an important consideration for reducing inappropriate or unwanted contact.
- Your child should never agree to meet someone they have met online unless they have your permission and are **accompanied by yourself or a trusted adult.**



What to do if you need help

If your child experiences inappropriate or unwanted contact or is a victim of online child sexual exploitation, it is essential you know what to do.

- If **something feels wrong then it probably is**; trust your instincts.
- Support your child and encourage open and non-judgmental conversation – coming forward can take courage and **a child may be reluctant to seek help** if they fear they may be in trouble for their actions online.
- Make a report to the **Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation** (accce.gov.au)
- To assist with the report, **collect screenshots or photos of the interactions** and the user's profile. It is important to do this before blocking or deleting the user or you may lose the chat content.
- Seek professional help or support services for your child.



What are the signs?

Unfortunately there is no single clear sign to indicate a child is the victim of online abuse.

Victims of online grooming may be **manipulated to keep a secret** or feel ashamed.

Be aware of your child's typical online behaviour and maintain open and non-judgemental communication to encourage your child to come forward if they need help or support.



Research suggests that many parents/carers indicated they would respond negatively or in a way that would exacerbate the issue in the instance of online child sexual exploitation. It is important to remember that these situations can be complex and a child may be reluctant to seek help if they fear they may be in trouble for their actions. (accce.gov.au/research)

Getting help

Online child sexual exploitation, including **grooming** and **extortion**, can be reported to the **Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation** (accce.gov.au).

The **ThinkUKnow website** (thinkuknow.org.au) has information and resources to prevent online child sexual exploitation as well as how to report and get help.

If a child is in immediate danger, call 000.

If you become aware of explicit content that has been posted online, including child sexual abuse material, report the site to the **eSafety Commissioner** (esafety.gov.au). They have a range of powers to take action to have content removed.

Kids Helpline (kidshelpline.com.au) is a free, confidential telephone and online counselling service for young people between 5 and 25 years old.

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