

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) includes any kind of sexual act or behavior with a child and includes contact and non-contact events (e.g., taking sexual pictures or videos of a child). Commonly, the child knows the offender.

Abusers use **grooming** to **gain a child's trust** in order to slowly begin and continue sexual relationships with victims in secret. The process of grooming may last **months or even years** to break through a child's defenses and **increase the child's acceptance of physical contact**. The offender may also groom the parents or caregivers by convincing them of their **trustworthiness with children**. Abusers are likely to be someone **the child or caregiver knows and trusts**, including friends and family members.

The 6 Stages of Grooming: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse¹

FACT SHEET

1. Targeting the Child

Offenders may target and take advantage of a child's sensitivities and defenselessness. Those who commit child sexual abuse look for children who are lonely or have low self-confidence, as well as children who may have an unstable home life, emotional neediness, or limited parental supervision.

2. Gaining the Child's (and Caregiver's) Trust

Those who commit child sexual abuse work to gain the trust of parents or caregivers in order to lower suspicion and gain access to the child. The offender gathers information about the child by getting to know their needs, and then finding ways to meet them. The individual may introduce secrecy to build trust with the child and distance the child from their parents or caregiver, such as allowing the child to do something their parents would not allow.

3. Fulfilling a Need

Once an offender begins to fulfill the child's needs with gifts, affection, or attention, the individual becomes more important in the child's life.

4. Isolation

The offender may offer to babysit for free or do other "favors," like one-on-one tutoring or coaching, in order to create situations where they can be alone with the child. Parents and caregivers may unknowingly encourage this supposed "helpful" behavior. The offender may begin to emphasize to the child that they are the only person who truly understands and loves the child.

5. Sexualizing the Relationship

Grooming often begins with nonsexual touching in order to make touch a normal part of the relationship so that they do not resist a more sexual touch. Over time, the adult takes advantage of the child's curiosity and trust, and begins to add sexual activities to the relationship.

6. Maintaining Control

Those who commit child sexual abuse commonly use threats or guilt to maintain power over the child. The offender wants the child to keep the abuse a secret to be sure the abuse can continue. The offender will engage in emotional control. They may say things like: "If you tell your dad about this, he is going to hate you;" "If you tell, I won't be able to give you gifts anymore;" or "If you tell, your mom is going to get hurt." The offender may normalize the inappropriate behavior with the child, or even blame the child for letting the abuse happen.

If you or someone you know suspects child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency or department of child protective services. The [Darkness to Light National Child Sexual Abuse Helpline](https://www.d2l.org/child-grooming-signs-behavior-awareness) can provide local resources and information at 1-866-FOR-LIGHT or via a crisis textline (Text "LIGHT" to 741741). You can also contact the [ChildHelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline](https://www.d2l.org/Learning_Library/RFGB/#/) at 1-800-422-4453 for 24/7 support via phone and text. For more information or additional resources, visit <https://mcasa.org/prevention/preventing-child-sexual-abuse>

¹Grooming and red flag behaviors (2019). Darkness to Light. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.d2l.org/child-grooming-signs-behavior-awareness>
Red Flags and Grooming Behavior Online Module. Darkness to Light. Retrieved November 14, 2025 from: https://www.d2l.org/Learning_Library/RFGB/#/