



## Grooming and Red Flag Behaviors in Youth Programs

Sexual Grooming is the deceptive process wherein a would-be perpetrator prepares a child for sexual abuse (CSA) and prevents disclosure and detection. To prevent CSA, it is vital to identify sexual grooming behaviors that can be considered “red flag” behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

Programs must establish clear standards for appropriate behaviors and communicate these standards to staff, volunteers, participants, and parents. In addition, behaviors that are outside these standards must be corrected and documented in order to prevent continuance or escalation. Multiple red flag behaviors are usually present prior to, during, and after child sexual abuse, reinforcing the importance of correction at the first instance.

The following are common red flag behaviors across the stages of the sexual grooming process.<sup>2</sup>

*Selection of vulnerable child- The perpetrator often chooses a child who exhibits:*

- A lack of supervision or parents who are not resources for the child.
- Psychological vulnerability- the child has low self-esteem; feels lonely or unloved.
- Social isolation from peers and/or family.

*Gaining access, increasing isolation, and trust development*

- The perpetrator forms a relationship to the child, building trust, friendship, and/or feelings of peership.
- The perpetrator may spend time with the family to gain trust and future access to the child.
- The perpetrator may then physically and/or psychologically separate the child from peers and family.
- The perpetrator may give the child attention or exhibit favoritism.

*Gradual sexualization of the relationship between the abuser and child :*

- The perpetrator desensitizes the child to touch by first engaging in nonsexual physical contact. This can include tickling, stroking the child’s head, or continuously and unnecessarily putting a hand on a nonsexual part of the child’s body.
- The perpetrator’s touching progresses to a sexual manner, on top of and later under or without clothes.
- The perpetrator may intentionally enter the bedroom or locker room while the child is undressed, or dress together with the child, exposing themselves to the child.
- The perpetrator may expose the child to sexual content such as pornography or discuss sexual behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeglic, Elizabeth L., Georgia M. Winters, and Benjamin N. Johnson. “Identification of Red Flag Child Sexual Grooming Behaviors.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 136 (February 2023): 105998. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105998>.

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Craven, Sarah Brown, & Elizabeth Gilchrist. “Sexual grooming of children: Review of literature and theoretical considerations.” *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 12:3 (November 2006): 1355-2600. DOI: [10.1080/13552600601069414](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600601069414)





*Post-abuse maintenance behaviors:*

- The perpetrator may persuade the child that sexual touching is normal and/or morally acceptable.
- The perpetrator may instruct the child not to tell anyone what happened and encourage them to keep secrets.
- The perpetrator may use rewards, bribes, or promises of no punishment to prevent the child from telling.
- The perpetrator may make the child feel responsible for the abuse.
- The perpetrator may threaten the child with abandonment, rejection, or their family breaking up.

Be aware of adults who exhibit clusters of the following behaviors, especially if the individual does not stop their behaviors after being corrected and informed of the proper behavior.

- The adult ignores program or institutional policies about interacting with youth.
- The adult uses social networking sites and text messages to contact youth privately or outside the program.
- The adult has a favorite or preferred youth, or bends the rules for certain youth.
- The adult prefers time and friendships with youth over other adults, and/or behaves more as their peer rather than a supervising teacher or counselor.
- The adult appears eager to work with youth, and cannot answer questions regarding appropriate boundaries or differences between children and adults.
- The adult engages in excessive or unnecessary physical contact with youth.
- The adult uses inappropriate language or jokes.
- The adult keeps secrets with youth.
- The adult finds reasons to spend time alone with youth.
- The adult gives special gifts to youth.

If you suspect an individual is sexually grooming a child, you must speak up. Red flag behaviors can be identified and child sexual abuse can be prevented.

Contact your Program Supervisor to disclose the red flag behaviors. In addition, or if the Program Supervisor is the suspected perpetrator, you may use these contacts:

- VCU Police: (804) 828-1234
- VCU Helpline: (888) 242-6022
- VCU Protection of Minors Office: (804) 828-1524 or [youth@vcu.edu](mailto:youth@vcu.edu)

If the red flag behaviors have progressed and you suspect child abuse, you must report to the Virginia Department of Social Services at (800) 552-7096 immediately.