

Grooming Behaviors in Child Molesters

"Grooming" is a term used to refer to the process child molesters use to create an environment where they can sexually abuse a child without being caught and without the child telling. Child molesters use this process to establish trust, gain access to children, desensitize them to touch, develop an intimate emotional bond, isolate them from other trusted adults, create complicity, and maintain secrecy. Child molesters will typically groom children and their families for months, sometimes even years, before violating sexual boundaries. The process is identifiable, making abuse predictable and preventable.

Below are some of the common grooming behaviors child molesters use:

- Is overly helpful to adults
- Makes you or children feel uncomfortable with lack of boundaries
- Engages in excessive physical contact with children
- Spends more time with children than adults his own age
- Spends excessive time interacting with children via e-mail, text messaging, and social media
- Is unusually aware of kid's trends, terminology, computer games, and music
- Signs of other physical abuse, verbal abuse, neglect, domestic violence, or substance abuse
- Exploits actual or implied authority and idolatry
- Is overly interested in the sexuality or developing body of pre-teens and teens
- Arranges to spend uninterrupted time with kids
- Is great with the kids or too good to be true
- Showers kids with gifts, treats, and special outings
- Lets kids break the rules or get away with inappropriate behavior
- Asks kids to keep secrets
- Insists on bathing with or washing children who are old enough to do it themselves
- Goes into the bathroom when independent children are showering or using the toilet
- Walks in on children when they are dressing
- Creates an intimate emotional relationship with kids
- Significantly favors one child over another, one gender over another, or one age range over another
- Watches pornography or has sex in front of kids
- Is always singing children's praises to their parents
- Gives gifts to parents
- Insists on private behind closed doors time with kids
- Administers regular enemas or medical checks (more common in incest abuse and group homes)
- Leaves the bedroom during the night or insists on kids sleeping with them (incest abuse, group homes, or overnights)

If someone displays one of the above behaviors, it does not necessarily mean that they are a child molester but it should be considered a red flag that causes you to pay attention to see if there are additional behaviors that raise concern. If you see a pattern of several grooming behaviors, you should suspect that abuse is likely to occur if the behavior is not interrupted - tell the person their behavior is inappropriate and restrict their access to the child or tell someone who can. If the pattern persists or is apparent with multiple children, it is reasonable to suspect that abuse has or may occur - report your concerns to local law enforcement and child protective services.

Let's look further into the word "suspect" so we are all on the same page. The definition of suspect is to "have an idea or impression of the existence, presence, or truth of (something) without certain proof."¹ It is not up to you to prove that abuse has taken place before reporting to authorities. You simply have to have an idea or impression that something has taken place.

Former Deputy District Attorney and author, Robin Sax, says, "Reporting your suspicion is not the same as making an accusation. You are just asking the authorities to investigate the possibility that there may be a problem."² While the law differs by state, all states designate professionals who work with children to be mandated reporters³ and the law requires them to report suspicions of abuse, not just incidents where they have facts or hard evidence. Our hope is that every adult would consider it a moral obligation to report abuse, even if they are not required by law.

If you see a pattern of grooming behaviors, or receive any information directly or indirectly that would cause you to suspect that a child has been abused, it should be reported to authorities immediately - police and child protective services.

For more information contact Prevent Child Abuse America at 312-663-3520 or at mailbox@preventchildabuse.org.

1. Google Search, accessed August 5, 2014, https://www.google.com/search?q=suspect+definition&dq=suspect+definition&aq=chrome.69i57.2763j0j7&sourceid=chrome&meand_ssm=93&ie=UTF-8.
2. Robin Sax, *It Happens Every Day: Inside the World of a Sex Crimes DA* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010), 135.
3. "Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect (State Statutes Current Through November 2013)," *Child Welfare Information Gateway*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014): 1, https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/manda.cfm.
4. Diane Cranley, *8 Ways to Create their Fate: Protecting the Sexual Innocence of Children in Youth-Serving Organizations* (Mustang: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC, 2015), 340.