

# #weekly WISDOM

## Grooming Behaviors of Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse

This message of #WeeklyWisdom is brought to you by Kristi Taylor, the Education Director at the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County, a proud partner of the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth. This week's messaging focuses on the concept of grooming.

### Do you know a teen/tween that...

- Walks to school or around town with their friends?
- Loves having the newest phones, clothes, jewelry, sneakers, etc.?
- Spends time on social media or gaming?
- Desires to be in a romantic relationship?
- Is curious or confused about sex, their own sexuality, and their body?
- Feels misunderstood?
- Fights with their parents or caregivers?
- Wants more independence?
- Tests boundaries or takes risks?

If you can look at that list and not answer with a resounding, "YES!," then I'm not so sure you know any teens or tweens!

The items in this list are exactly what we would expect from teens. In fancy terms we call it "developmentally appropriate" or "developmentally expected." These are the behaviors that allow teens to better develop an understanding of who they are, what they believe, how they will make decisions for themselves that may not be the same decisions we make. This is a time period where the adults and mentors in their life have a tremendous opportunity to provide them with the resources and tools to help them through what is actually a very difficult process (I think we can all remember middle and high school \*\*personal cringe\*\*)

While the ages from 12-21 include great opportunities for learning and growth, the same thoughts and behaviors that are part of that learning can also be targeted and exploited by abusive people. One particular tactic used by exploitative people is a process called "grooming."

[Grooming is an intentional process](#) that many offenders engage in to gain the trust of their victim and to desensitize them to physically or emotionally harmful actions. As a result, victims may be less likely to recognize the escalating behavior as abusive or report the abuse. Much like the metaphor of a lobster in a pot, a teen initially may feel more free, safer, appreciated and valued before realizing that those feelings came with a price they had not fully realized. The process of grooming can make the victim feel like they were a willing participant or complicit in the abuse, because they sought out a relationship with the offender, were excited about gifts they received, or wanted the money they were given for a nude picture or sexual act. Feeling responsible for these choices and believing that abuse was their fault makes it harder for teens to ask for help from others.

So what does "grooming" have to do with the developmentally expected behaviors we see with teens? Just about everything!

First, teens are often left out of the conversation about child sexual abuse- even in the name. This provides a fantastic opportunity for adult offenders to use against teens they are targeting. The last thing a teen who is struggling for independence and is curious about sex and sexuality wants to be categorized as is a "child". Children are identified as immature, easily manipulated, in need of protection; teens are rebelling against all of those things and an offender can use that to their advantage. An example of this includes statements like:

- "You're so much more mature than other girls your age, I wish your parents could see that."
- "I know it's wrong but I just don't feel the connection with men my own age that I do with you."

These phrases can meet so many needs that we expect teens to have: feeling wanted, mature, attractive, and as individuals independent from group or family structures.

Second, let's think about the desire to feel connected and special. To be clear, this is not a need unique to teens- all humans have a desire to feel connected to others. While this need is often exploited by offenders, it can be an especially powerful tactic with teens. Imagine a teen who is feeling isolated, who is struggling to name their gender or sexual identity and feels rejected by their family or peers. That teen will likely have a deep desire for connection, to feel "normal" or to be heard. Offenders will exploit this situation by being willing to listen patiently to "help them understand their sexuality" or by being the first person in their life to validate that "it's okay to feel this way." Offenders may increase the teens isolation by suggesting that they understand and care more than other people in the teen's life. They may create a fake persona that mirrors the teens interests or fuels conflict with a teen's family to build a sense of connection, trust, and dependency on the offender. Offenders can then hold that relationship over a teen to make them engage in behaviors, including running away, which puts the them at even greater risk of being coerced or feeling obliged to perform sexual acts in exchange for care, housing, and emotional connection/validation.

The sexual abuse and exploitation of teens is a complex issue built on a person of power or authority targeting aspects of a teen's development with the intent of harm.

It is normal to hope that there are ways to help you eliminate these needs, feelings, or behaviors from the teens in your life so they can't be taken advantage of... but that implies that there is something wrong with this stage of development that needs to be fixed. And while, another time, we should talk about how to help teens navigate this stage of their lives, what I really wonder and want to leave you with is: What would it look like if we, as a community, focused on preventing, identifying, and holding accountable the adults who target and exploit teens instead of blaming teens for being teens in this stage of development?

*If you know someone who has abused or may be grooming a teen, or if you know a teen who has experienced sexual abuse, and you want to know more about what you can do, the Advocacy Center is here for you. Reach us through our 24 hour hotline at 607-277-5000.*

*To hear about upcoming [community workshops](#) about protecting youth in Tompkins County from sexual abuse and [commercial sexual exploitation](#) follow the Advocacy Center on social media.*



**Our Community Partners:** Alcohol & Drug Council of Tompkins County, Tompkins County Youth Services, TST BOCES Youth Development Program, Tompkins County Health Department, The Advocacy Center, Cooperative Extension- Tompkins County, Catholic Charities- Tompkins/Tioga