



Online grooming

Grooming is the way people who want to harm children get close to them and make them believe abusive behaviour is normal. Sometimes, but not always, grooming happens online.

The grooming process is usually associated with sexual exploitation, but sometimes people who want to exploit children in other ways use similar techniques to gain their trust. Here are a few other issues to look out for:

Extremism. Some experts have likened the political or religious radicalisation process to grooming for sexual exploitation. Young people who are feeling vulnerable, insecure or disillusioned may be targeted by extremist groups and made to believe that violence and intolerance are normal. Social media has been a powerful recruitment tool for some extremist groups.

Gangs. Gang culture can be appealing to young people who are looking to gain respect and fit in. Like other types of grooming, gangs may initially play up the positive aspects of gang culture – feeling like you belong, for instance – to draw young people in. Most gang recruitment happens offline, but because it's often based on status, social media can be used to promote their reputation.

Warning signs – online

There are different warning signs, depending if you're looking out for sexual exploitation, radicalisation, gang involvement or something else entirely. But there are a few tech-related signs to keep in mind, including:

- Increased secrecy or defensiveness about online activity.
- Having more than one phone or duplicate social media accounts.
- Getting calls or messages from unknown contacts.
- Not wanting to be away from their mobile phone, even for short periods of time.
- Falling out with or ignoring their normal friend group, possibly associating with older or worrying new friends.

It's important to remember that not all, or even most, grooming happens online. And whether or not someone is being groomed online there may also be offline warning signs, like staying out all night or dressing differently.

Read more on the signs of grooming for sexual exploitation here: <http://parentinfo.org/article/at-risk-of-sexual-exploitation-know-the-signs>

CEOP – more information and help with sexual grooming and child sexual exploitation. <https://www.ceop.police.uk/>

Quilliam – more information about radicalisation and extremism. <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/>

Gangs Unite – more information and support on dealing with gangs. <http://gangsunitecic.org.uk/>

If your child is in immediate danger, you should call 999. Never confront a potential abuser yourself – this could put both you and your child at risk.