Risks children face online: Online grooming

What is online grooming?

Grooming is a process used to prepare a child for sexual abuse. An offender's aim when grooming will be to gain access to a child and build a relationship with that child. Grooming can take many different forms, from one off contact which may include sexual advances, to a series of events over time. It may start with an adult scanning websites to identify a vulnerable child or befriending a child, perhaps by pretending to have common hobbies or interests or using flattery to trick a child into trusting them.

Online it is easier for an offender to lie and gain one to one contact with a child, for example through a social networking or gaming site. They can share images or videos relating to their claimed common interests and build a 'relationship' away from any adult supervision.

Once a relationship is established an offender may then introduce sexual themes to the conversation, for example, asking the child about their sexual experiences, sharing pornography with them or asking them for sexual pictures of themselves. Different offenders will have different approaches therefore sometimes this process may be very quick it can also take days, weeks or even months. Increasingly offenders are persuading children to perform sexual acts on webcam.

Signs of grooming

Look out for an unhealthy or heightened level of internet usage. Has your child become more secretive about who they are talking to and where they conduct their online conversations?

To your knowledge has your child engaged in any sexual behaviour online or via text, chat or webcam? Have they got any new electronic devices or gifts that they may not have been able to obtain for themselves?

Talk to your child about meeting their online friend's offline. If they intend to meet any of these online friends you need to set clear boundaries, tell them why you are concerned for their safety and that they must take you or a trusted adult with them to the meeting.

What can parents and carers do to protect their child online?

Parents and carers need to be mindful that part of the fun of being online is communicating and often sites are designed for you to do so with people you don't know. It is important to talk to your child about who they are friends with and how to manage these online relationships.

Not sure where to start? Talk to your child about:

- What sites they use
- The friends they have and how they know them
- How they communicate with these friends
- The type of information they can share

Top tips

Talk to your child about online grooming. Explain how easy it can be to lie online and the reasons why an adult may wish to contact them.

For primary age children talk to them about the topic in the context of stranger danger. Strangers are people you or they don't know. In the online world there are strangers too and they must not talk privately with them or give out any personal information online.

For older children, the conversation might be a little more difficult. They may have built quite an online network over the years, and might feel you're intruding into their private matters. Why not use one of the Thinkuknow resources to open a conversation. Our age appropriate education films are available through the parents and carers website (www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents) or CEOP YouTube channel (www.youtube.co.uk/ceop)

Talk about their online friends. Ask them to think carefully about who they chat and share information with. If they don't know them in the real world they need to delete or limit what they share with them, for example not sharing their photos, videos or their locations.

Let your child know that you are always there for support. Let them know that you understand how easy it can be to get into difficulties online. Get them to talk to you if anyone makes inappropriate/ sexual comments and ensure they know that, no matter what's happened, you are there to help.

Reporting to CEOP

If someone has acted inappropriately towards your child, it may be sexual chat, asking them to do something that makes them feel uncomfortable or someone being insistent on meeting up, you can report directly to CEOP via the CEOP Safety Centre at www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre.

This information has been adapted from the Thinkuknow parents and carers website – **www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents**

Thinkuknow is the education programme from the National Crime Agency CEOP command. The CEOP command works to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation both online and offline. Thinkuknow offers a range of safety information for children, young people, practitioners and parents/carers

The CEOP Safety Centre offers information and advice for children and young people, parents/carers and professionals on reporting child sexual exploitation and abuse and provides a route to report directly to CEOP – **www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre.**