

Grooming

Grooming behaviour is predatory behaviour committed by any person 18 years or over, with the intention of engaging a child under the age of 16 years in sexual activity. Grooming behaviour may occur in person or via mobile phones, social media or the internet. Widespread access to the internet has put children and young people at an increased risk of targeting by child sex offenders.

While the grooming offence in Section 49M of the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) focuses on protecting children up to the 16 years of age, the Archdiocesan duty of care extends to ensuring that young people over the age of 16 are equally protected.

Clergy, employees and volunteers within our Church hold a position of responsibility, trust and authority and any behaviour that is intended to involve a young person in sexual activity is a breach of the CAM Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy.

The Betrayal of Trust report found that perpetrators of child abuse in organisations often obtained credibility, position within an organisation.

Department of Justice and Regulation 2017

See “Grooming” section of the INFORMATION SHEET: Crimes Act – failure to protect, failure to disclose and grooming.

Grooming behaviour is often targeted at children, their families (or guardians) or other adults who have care or influence over the child or young person in an organisational context (e.g. colleagues, supervisors) to enable access to the child or young person.

Male and female perpetrators of child sexual abuse engage in a broad range of grooming behaviours designed to establish a relationship with the child in order to create a situation where abuse can occur, in effect tricking the child or their parent/guardian into thinking that they are in a safe and normal relationship. Some male perpetrators enlist female partners to enable access to children and young people. For example, the female partner may offer babysitting services and allow the male perpetrator to make contact with the children.

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse ‘will exploit any vulnerability to increase the child or young person’s dependence on them and reduce the likelihood of the child speaking out’ (NSPCC n.d.).

Examples of grooming behaviour include:

- giving gifts including money
- paying special attention to the child to create a friendship or relationship
- contriving situations to promote close physical contact and gradually directing the behaviour in a sexual direction (e.g. tickling that moves from under the arms to the breast area, wrestling)
- showing favouritism
- communicating privately, in person or electronically, to single a child out for a ‘special’ relationship

It is important to note that some grooming behaviours may not on their own be criminal or abusive; however, often these behaviours constitute a breach of role or organisational boundaries. Defined role boundaries, in addition to organisational expectations of behaviour set out in a code of conduct, are an important protective factor.

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- arranging contact or outings with the child offsite or beyond the parish, agency or entity's supervision
- the perpetrator ingratiating themselves with parents (and guardians) to gain access to the child (e.g. offering to babysit or take the child on an outing or camping)
- providing a child with alcohol or drugs
- showing a child offensive, confronting or obscene content (e.g. pornographic material, online images).

Grooming may be difficult to detect because the perpetrator often strives to conceal the grooming behaviour by:

- creating opportunities for contact with the child beyond the organisation's supervisory structures and the scrutiny of others (e.g. spending time with the child in an isolated and unsupervised setting, arranging meetings with the child offsite, communicating privately with the child via social media)
- manipulating the relationship that they have built with the child to ensure that the child keeps the grooming behaviour and/or sexual abuse a secret (e.g. telling the child that their friendship is special and the sexual behaviour is an expression of love)
- involving the child in dangerous or illegal activities (e.g. smoking, drinking alcohol, being photographed in a state of undress), enabling the perpetrator to then entrap the child by threatening to expose the child's behaviour to parents or others
- undermining the child's confidence (e.g. by telling them that they will not be believed) or confusing the child about the nature of the relationship (e.g. 'He is hurting me, but he says that he loves me')
- coercing the child to keep the grooming behaviour or sexual abuse a secret by using threats (e.g. "I will hurt your family" or by telling the child that a disclosure would 'destroy their family').

USEFUL RESOURCES

Crimes Act 1958 (Vic) s 49M ('Grooming for sexual conduct with a child under the age of 16').

www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol_act/ca195882/s49m.html

(Section 49M was inserted into the *Crimes Act 1958* by the *Crimes Amendment (Grooming) Act 2014* (Vic).)

REFERENCES

Department of Justice and Regulation 2017, *Betrayal of Trust INFORMATION SHEET: the new organisational duty of care to prevent child abuse*.

www.justice.vic.gov.au/safer-communities/protecting-children-and-families/betrayal-of-trust-fact-sheet-the-new

NSPCC [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] n.d., *Grooming: What it is, signs and how to protect children*.

www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/grooming



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The Archdiocese of Melbourne is committed to the safety, wellbeing and dignity of all children, young people and vulnerable adults.