

GROOMING – THE SIGNS & STEPS TO TAKE IF YOU’RE WORRIED

“Looking back, the grooming took many forms and was often in plain sight. Parents were often groomed as part of the process, taken in by the aura of the individual, the quality of the team and the possibilities of great things for the future. Free sports gear, favourites within the team, constant pressure to perform and trips away were all part of gaining power, control and trust. We often hear, ‘It won’t happen to my child.’ Believe it, because it could. The vast majority of people who are involved in football are good, they develop positive relationships with players, but sometimes parents need to take a step back and be willing to ask questions if something doesn’t feel right.”

“If this document makes one parent take a step back and be willing to ask questions when something doesn’t feel right, then it would have been worthwhile.”

Members of The FA Survivor Support and Safeguarding Advisory Group, with lived experience of child sexual abuse

INTRODUCTION

Thankfully most children and young people’s experience in football is a positive one, but sadly for some children this isn’t the case.

Appallingly there are people in society who want to harm or abuse children – this can happen both in the online virtual environment and or face to face.

Together, we all need to be vigilant and ensure that keeping children safe - in this case in football, is always the most important topic.

This guidance aims to help you understand what grooming is, the signs that may indicate a child is being groomed and most importantly what you can do if you think your child, or a child you know, is at risk of

being harmed. Whilst this is a challenging topic to address its important to share this information with you in case you are not aware of it, and it helps to keep children safe.

If you are affected by any of the information in this guidance there are specialist organisations identified on page seven that you can access for advice and support. You can also contact your Club Welfare Officer or County FA Designated Safeguarding Officer for guidance.

PLEASE REMEMBER:

- Most people get involved in football for all the right reasons.
- Most children and young people experience safe, fun and inclusive football environments free from abuse.
- When a child is abused it is never their fault. It can be difficult to understand how or why a child has got into a situation that has put them at risk of being abused but it is important to support them through it without judgement. People who abuse children often use a process called ‘grooming’.
- Some of this content may be upsetting - it may be helpful to take a break from reading this and revisit it when you are ready to so.



UNDERSTANDING THE GROOMING PROCESS

WHAT IS GROOMING?

- Grooming refers to a process by which an individual builds a relationship, trust or emotional connection in order to manipulate those around them – typically (but not only) the child – to provide opportunities to abuse. It can involve communication with a child where this is an intention to commit a sexual offence in person and/or online.
- Children/young people who are groomed are at risk of being exploited, trafficked, radicalised or used for criminal activity.
- Anyone can groom a child or young person, no matter their gender, race or age. This could be a stranger, someone familiar to the family such as a family member or a friend, or someone who has targeted them such as a teacher, a coach or a faith group leader.
- Grooming can happen in person, online or a combination of both. It is a process that takes place over months or years, or it can be a rapid process that takes place in a matter of weeks, days or hours.
- Any child is at risk of being groomed however, disabled children and young people are three **times more** likely to be abused or neglected than non-disabled young people

It can take place in multiple indoor and outdoor settings such as at home, a sports club, at school, a religious setting or within communities. With the ease of access to online platforms such as games, social media, video sharing services (such as TikTok) and live streaming sites abusers can contact children and young people at any time. Abusers can use the internet to be themselves from the setting they know the child from or create a fake profile which may pretend to either; be a friend/peer of the child or young person, have similar hobbies/interests or be from the same environment. A child will not know they are being groomed.

You might find the following short video helpful in summarising what has been shared so far.

#WholsSam

This video was produced by CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection). You can find out more about their education resources for parents and children, [here](#).

GROOMING CAN BE USED BY AN ABUSER IN AN ATTEMPT TO:

- **Sexually assault a child or young person.** Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not

the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration or non-penetrative acts such as kissing or touching outside of clothing. Forms of sexual abuse can also occur online via either webcams or sending sexually explicit images.

- **Criminally exploit a child.** Child Criminal Exploitation (as set out in the Serious Violence Strategy, published by the Home Office), is where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person into committing criminal activity. This could relate to money, drugs, theft and or violence.
- **Radicalise a child.** Radicalisation is the action of process of causing someone to adopt radical positions on political or social issues. This process can occur through seeing images or videos and news from unreliable sources and/or progress into participating in meetings to discuss such injustices where violence seems to be the only answer. Radicalisation makes those at risk more likely to support terrorism and violent acts of extremism and possibly even commit such criminal acts themselves.
- **Involve a child or young person in 'County Lines'.** County Lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of 'deal line'. They are likely to exploit children to move and store the drugs and money, and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. This may also involve children staying in accommodation and selling and manufacturing drugs.
- **Target children and young people for trafficking.** Trafficking is where children and young people are tricked, coerced or forced to leave their homes and are moved or transported from one location to another and then exploited, forced to work or sold. Children and young people can be trafficked for sexual exploitation, benefit fraud, forced marriage, domestic slavery or forced labour. Traffickers often groom children, families and communities to gain their trust and lead them to believe this is an opportunity that will benefit the family. Trafficking does not have to be international; a child can be trafficked locally, for example between cars or hotels.

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- **Sexually exploit the child.** Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual and can also occur online.

The following link takes you to a powerful trailer for 'Chelsea's Story', a production that was developed to raise awareness among young people, portraying the experience of a teenager who was groomed.

[Chelsea's Choice](#)

HOW DOES GROOMING HAPPEN?

Building a relationship

- Abusers attempt to gain trust with a child by discussing shared interests, hobbies and sports or commenting or liking the same social media posts. They will use information about the child to their advantage.

- The relationship they build can take different forms such as a romantic relationship, a mentor, an authority figure.
- Abusers may also build a relationship with the child's family or friends, so they think the abuser is a friend, trustworthy, respectable or has authority.
- All of these relationships make the child feel dependant on the abuser, giving the abuser power and control.

Showing the child attention

- The abuser may begin to show the child attention through forms of flattery, buying them gifts, giving them money, promising to help progress their talent or simply showing a keen interest in them. Groomers will often make children believe that they are the only ones who understand the experiences that children are going through and treat them like an 'adult'. The abuser will likely encourage the child to not tell anyone about their relationship.
- Once they have the child's trust, the abuser often steers the conversation towards their intentions, this could involve talking about sexual experiences, criminal activity, religious ideologies or asking for them to share images or videos of themselves online through their mobile

phones which could be sexual. This is often referred to as 'sexting' (also known as youth produced sexual imagery). It is important to remember that when anyone shares images or videos of themselves online, they may lose control of them and those images and videos may be shared with a wider audience. Sexting can also be a consensual act between children or young people of a similar age, and whilst still illegal this does not always involve the child or young person being groomed.

- In time the conversations get deeper and the asks greater. When a child shows any discomfort the abuser may 'downplay' the ask making this seem like normal behaviour so they're more likely to agree to participate or try to blackmail the child by threatening to share any explicit pictures or videos they may have or details of their conversations, making it difficult for the child to stop the conversations and/or report the abuser.

SIGNS AND INDICATORS

It can be very difficult for a parent to tell if a child is being groomed, as the signs aren't always obvious and may be hidden. For older children, it may be difficult to differentiate between 'normal teenage behaviour' and some of the signs and indicators listed in

this guidance. It is important to keep an eye out for increased instances of changes in these behaviours, that may indicate that something more is impacting your child. A child is unlikely to know they're being groomed or have been groomed. They may be experiencing worry or confusion and may be less likely to speak to an adult they trust.

Some of the things to look out for include:

- Becoming very secretive about how they're spending their time, who they're talking to, where they're going, what they're doing online and what sites they are visiting;
- Switching screens when you come near the computer, tablet or phone. Having unexplained money, gifts or new things like clothes and mobile phones that you haven't given them, or they can't or won't explain;
- Engaging in risky behaviour such as drinking or drug-taking;
- Spending more time on their electronic devices, such as mobile phones, tablets or laptops;
- Suddenly or gradually withdrawing from family and friends;
- Becoming emotionally volatile;
- Sexualised behaviour, language or an understanding of sex that's not appropriate for their age;

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- Staying out later than usual or for longer periods, with little explanation of their whereabouts;
- A sudden and drastic change in appearance that causes concern that is not linked to fashion trends;
- Unexplained injuries, bruising, marks and self-harm;
- Significantly older boyfriend/girlfriend/romantic partner.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AS A PARENT/CARER

When your child enters a new setting it's important to ask questions about how they keep your child safe. In football, the 'Questions you should ask' guidance helps you to find out how clubs safeguard children and what can you do if you have any concerns within the club environment, you can access this [here](#).

- You can also speak to your child about keeping safe by reminding them of their right to:
 - Feel safe on and offline;
 - Healthy relationships and appropriate boundaries;
 - Not to be bullied, harassed or intimidated;
 - Not to feel uncomfortable or unsafe;

- Not to be discriminated against because of their age, gender, gender reassignment, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status or civil partnership, faith, ability or disability, pregnancy and maternity.

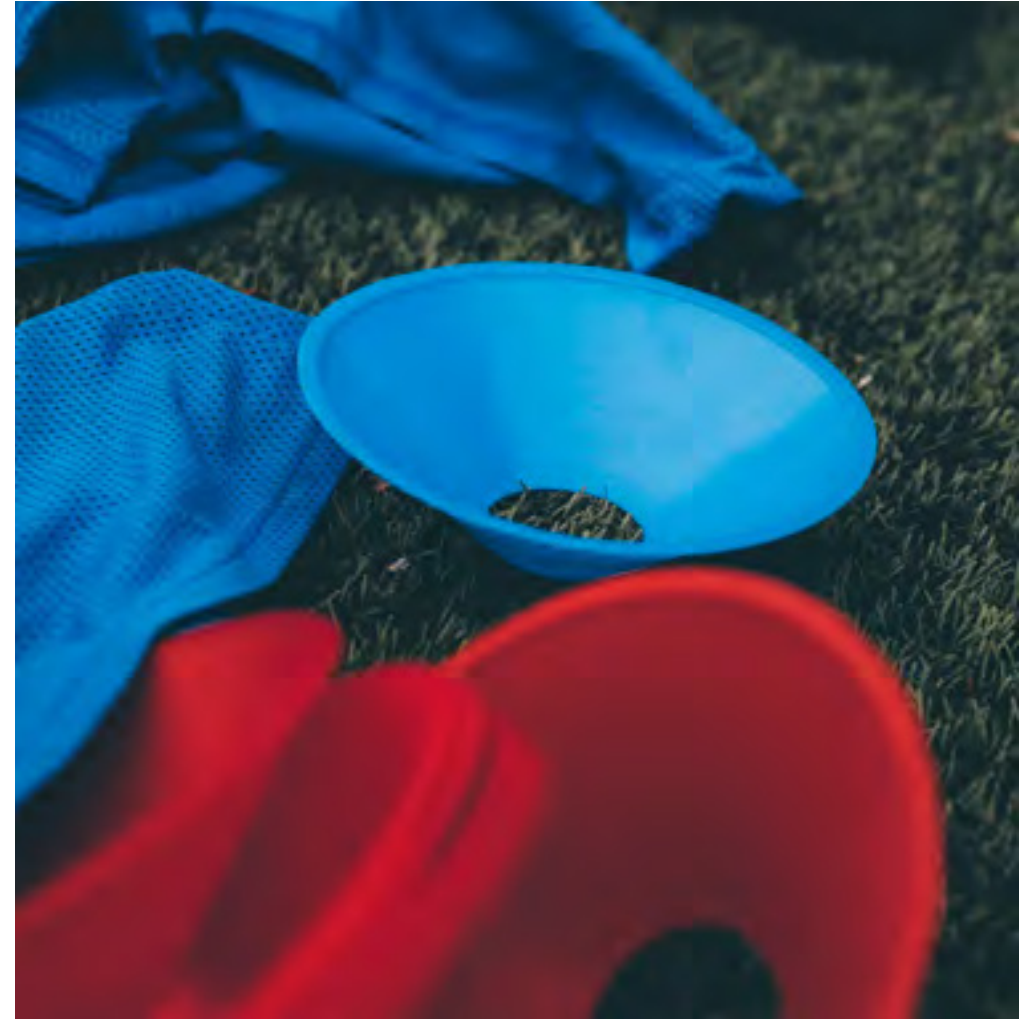
This can help encourage them to speak to you or another trusted adult if they feel unsafe.

It is also important to understand how to keep children safe online and knowing how to set up privacy settings and report content on social media sites such as; [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Snapchat](#) and [TikTok](#). All these websites have information on how to do this and how to report abuse.

Why not take a look at our guidance 'Tips to ensure your child's online safety' which is available [here](#).

There's further guidance available which focuses on:

- **'Safeguarding in the digital world'** which is available as a download [here](#).
- **'Physical contact and young people: Guidance for grassroots football'**, which is available as a download [here](#).
- **'Acceptable behaviours when working with young people: Guidance for grassroots football'**, which is available as a download [here](#).



UNDERSTANDING THE GROOMING PROCESS

WHAT YOU CAN DO IF YOU ARE CONCERNED YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN GROOMED OR ABUSED?

It is difficult for a parent/carer to hear that their child has been groomed or abused. You may feel angry and upset but it is important that you listen to what your child says and reassure them that you seek help and advice. It is likely that your child will be feeling anxious and will need your support. Try not to shout and make them feel like it's their fault. It's important to;

- Listen carefully to what they're saying. Be patient and focus on what they're telling you. Try not to express your views and feelings and try to conceal any shock or disbelief, as this could stop them from talking further;
- Let them know they've done the right thing by telling you, that you love them, and it is not their fault. This will help relax them and provide reassurance;
- Explain that you will get help. During this stage, they may still feel anxiety or worry, so be open and honest with them about who you will contact to reduce their anxiety.

As always, it is vital to not 'sit on information' and to report it. There are five ways to report a concern:

- To your club or league Designated Safeguarding Officer – please find out from your club who these people are;
- To your County FA Designated Safeguarding Officer. Click [here](#) for a list of County FA contacts;
- By emailing The FA Safeguarding Team at safeguarding@TheFA.com or by calling and asking for the team on **0800 169 1863**;
- If urgent and you cannot contact your club, league or County FA Designated Safeguarding Officer, you should call the NSPCC 24-hour helpline on **0808 800 5000**;
- If it is an emergency because your child or other children are at immediate risk, then call the Police or Children's Social Care in your area.

Please keep any images, videos or texts as these may be used as evidence.

It is important that you don't confront the alleged abuser. This may endanger your child further, or even yourself. If your child is being groomed, it can be a very distressing time for both of you. It's important to seek support and guidance as soon as possible and reassure your child that there is help available.

WHERE YOU CAN GO FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

If you're worried about your child, or indeed, someone else's child, there are several organisations that you can talk to. These include:

- **NSPCC:** The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children is the UK's leading children's charity who work towards ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, as well as providing support to parents, carers, and guardians.
- **CEOP:** The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command is a law enforcement agency to help keep children and young people safe from sexual abuse and grooming online.
- **Safer Internet:** The UK Safer Internet Centre is a partnership of three leading organisations; Children International, Internet Watch Foundation and SWGFL. They have one mission, to promote the safe and responsible use of technology for young people.
- **Internet Matters:** Internet Matters are a not-for-profit organisation that has a simple purpose – to empower parents and carers to keep children safe in the digital world.

- **Childline:** Childline is a free, private and confidential service where children and young people can talk about anything.
- **Parents Protect:** Parents Protect help parents and carers protect children and young people from sexual abuse exploitation.
- **National Working Group:** The National Working Group are a charity whose objective is to tackle child exploitation, in particular, but not exclusively, by promoting, enabling, supporting and developing the protection of children and young people who are affected by sexual exploitation.

You can also contact your GP for advice and guidance about yours or your child's mental or physical health. Organisations such as the **Mental Health Foundation**, **Mind** and **Young Minds** have useful advice. Further information on counselling services in your area visit the **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy** for your needs and ensure that your child knows about **Childline** and the other agencies listed above.