

The Grooming Process

How can you be sure who you're talking to online? Internet predators use what is known as the grooming process to create seemingly safe online relationships and then betray that friendship by attempting to break down barriers and cause harm.

Online predators find their "prey" by going to chat rooms where young people gather or by searching online profiles for a specific type of victim.

Predators use a process to "groom" their victims, which usually follows this pattern:

- (1) Establishes similar interests through chatting or instant messaging. This leads to more private communication like e-mail and phone calls.
- (2) Builds trust. A predator counts on the fact that establishing so much in common with an online friend will lead to a trusting relationship. A predator is hoping that you will develop such a trust that you will separate yourself from your true friends and family.
- (3) Keeps it a secret. It is a predator's goal to keep the friendship a secret from others. Engaging in a secret friendship like this leaves you vulnerable.
- (4) Breaks down barriers. A predator works on the trust that has been established and may break down barriers further by exposing you, the victim, to pictures or materials that may at first make you uncomfortable. This is a common tactic because kids and teens are naturally curious about many things. The more a victim is exposed to, the less he or she will feel that it is wrong.
- (5) Makes threats. Sometimes, but not always, a predator will make threats to the intended victim to keep the relationship a secret. Online threats are against the law. Think about it: Would a real friend threaten you or your family with harm?
- (6) Meets face to face. The ultimate goal of an Internet predator is to get the intended victim to meet with him or her in person. You may believe that you can never be tricked by someone you meet online, but remember that predators make it their business to learn tactics to deceive their prey. NEVER meet anyone in person who you only know online.

Best Advice

Online friendships can be fun, but always consider what kind of information you are sharing.

If you notice that one of your online friendships is following the grooming process pattern, proceed very cautiously. There is no reason for an online friend to want to have a secret relationship with you and/or to force you to meet in person.

Let your friends and family know about people you meet online, and tell someone immediately if you are threatened or feel uncomfortable about anything that is said or sent online.

Brittany

The following article is based on a compilation of several real stories about Internet safety issues.

Most teenagers and young adults these days have been online. Certainly there are plenty of good reasons to use the Internet – hanging out with friends, doing research, and playing games. Unfortunately, there is increasing danger involved in getting online.

Take Brittany for example. Brittany was a young teenager. She like to hangout, play softball, and chat on the Internet – especially chat with Jason, the friend she had met while online. Even though they had never met in person, she just knew that Jason was her soul mate. He liked everything she liked, and they could always talk about softball. He knew her team number, and she had described the new uniforms to him.

Jason had reminded Brittany about being careful; to be careful about giving out personal information online – he cared about her and wanted her to be safe. As a matter of fact, he had reminded her so often that she tended to tune him out. To her way of thinking, it wasn't like she chatted with anyone she didn't know! Besides, she never gave out her home address or phone number.

Brittany felt safe online. However, she wasn't fully aware of all of the dangers out there. Even without sharing her address, Brittany had supplied Jason with enough information in their conversations for him to be able to find her offline. And more importantly, Jason had built a trusting relationship with her, even though they had never met.

Fortunately, Brittany's friend was in reality, a 35-year-old law enforcement officer who was involved with the prevention of Internet crimes. Establishing an Internet relationship with Brittany was used to show how easy it is for people on the Internet to get information that can potentially put others – especially young people – in danger. Demonstrations such as this one have been used across the country to show that only until you know what the dangers are, and know how to protect yourself, can you be assured that you will have a great time online, and still be safe.