



**WHAT PARENTS  
NEED TO KNOW**

# **GROOMING IN SPORT**



Grooming occurs when someone intentionally engages in a series of manipulative behaviors in order to sexually abuse a child. While sports can help children increase their circle of safe and supportive adults, some may take advantage of a child's trusting instincts to groom children for abuse.

Grooming can occur in person, online, by phone, or in a combination of ways. Texts, social media, video chat, and messaging apps can give abusers constant (and potentially secret) access to children they are grooming.

In using trust-building actions to groom a child or their family members, abusers often focus on children who are isolated or vulnerable. Younger children and children with disabilities face increased risk of being groomed.

**Use this reference to identify, prevent, and respond to grooming behaviors.**

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## IDENTIFYING GROOMING

Since grooming involves manipulation, it can be hard to tell the difference between the actions of a caring adult and one grooming your child for abuse. Instead of focusing on isolated behaviors, look for patterns in which someone:

- » **Engages you and your child** to build trust beyond their role in sport by offering special treatment
- » **Isolates your child** by setting up ways to be alone with them or interfering with their friend and family relationships
- » **Tests boundaries** by blurring the line between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors
- » **Sexualizes interactions** by pushing sexual boundaries and introducing sexual topics and actions (many of these behaviors are also sexual abuse)

**Parents are more likely to recognize grooming behaviors when they become sexual. Identifying early grooming behaviors, such as those below, can help you stop grooming before it gets that far.**

- » Being overly interested in babysitting or other opportunities to be alone with your child
- » Befriending your child by acting like a peer, best friend, or “cool adult”
- » Giving your child or family members gifts, private lessons, or privileges no one else receives
- » Encouraging your child to spend time with them in secret (in person or online)
- » Talking with your child about sexual fantasies or adult relationship problems
- » Insisting on physical contact with your child (such as hugging, touching, or tickling)
- » Frequently walking in on or undressing in front of your child in bathrooms, showers, or changing areas
- » Using power or authority in order to have one-on-one interactions with your child

Talk with your child about grooming and ask if these, or any other, behaviors have made them uncomfortable. If you think someone in your child’s sport may be grooming them, talk to your child’s coach, an administrator, or the [U.S. Center for SafeSport](#).

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## PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO GROOMING

Remember that abusers not only groom children—they also groom parents. Here are actions you can take to prevent and respond to grooming:

- » **Get educated:** The U.S. Center for SafeSport has free, age-appropriate [educational resources](#) for parents and children.
- » **Ask about your organization's abuse prevention policies**, like those in the [Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policies \(MAAPP\)](#) that limit one-on-one interactions between adults and children in your child's sport organization.
- » **Speak up** when you see concerning behavior from coaches, volunteers, administrators, or older teenagers.
- » **Keep lines of communication open**—with your child, your child's coaches, and other parents.
- » **Set clear rules and expectations for your child's electronic communication** on cell phones, social media, or other digital platforms.
- » **Set guidelines for local and overnight travel.** Review these with your child and make sure they are comfortable with everything and everyone involved.
- » **Talk to your child about setting boundaries** for themselves and respecting those of others. For younger children, make sure they know who is allowed to help them with tasks that involve their private body parts.
- » **Tell your child they can tell you or another trusted adult if something is wrong**, that you will always believe them, and that they should never keep secrets from you.

You can report any behavior that you are concerned about to your child's sport organization or club. If your child is involved in the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Movement, you can also report to the [U.S. Center for SafeSport](#).

Find services and support in your community by contacting your [local Child Advocacy Center](#).

If you have questions about grooming or want to talk about abuse you or a loved one has experienced, contact the [SafeSport Helpline](#).