

## How to Recognize Online Grooming

**Y**ears ago, “grooming” meant how you combed your hair or whether or not you regularly brushed your teeth. It still does mean that in many circumstances. But there’s another type of grooming that has been hitting the news lately: the type of grooming a sexual predator does to set up a victim of sexual abuse. (Not all sexual abuse is preceded by grooming, but it is a common process in many cases, especially on the Internet.)

Grooming is, basically, manipulation. It can involve flattery, sympathy, gifts, money, and other enticements, such as the promise of modeling jobs. The short-term goal of grooming is for the victim to feel loved or just comfortable – comfortable enough to meet a stranger in person. (Always a bad idea.) And predators are willing to take their time.

That’s a general description of grooming, but remember predators tailor what they say or do to each person they are trying to manipulate. (And, yes, they are often grooming more than one, despite saying things like, “You’re the only one.”)

Online grooming is often difficult to recognize. Based on articles like this, you might think you are being groomed when someone is actually just trying to be friendly. Don’t worry about it. If you think someone is trying to manipulate you, tell someone. It’s always better to be safe than sorry.

Safeteens.com lists the following as the kind of behaviors to watch out for. Again, these are general; there are many variations.

“Let’s go private.” (to get you to leave the public chat room and create a private chat or

move to instant messaging or phone texting)

“Where’s your computer in the house?” (to see if parents might be around)

“Who’s your favorite band? designer? film? gear?” (questions like these tell the groomer more about you so they know what gifts to offer — e.g., concert tickets, Webcam, software, clothes, CDs)

“I know someone who can get you a modeling job.” (flattery, they figure, will get them everywhere)

“I know a way you can earn money fast.” (one of the tactics that snagged Justin Berry, 13, into what became his Webcam prostitution business, reported by the New York Times)

“You seem sad. Tell me what’s bothering you.” (the sympathy thing)

“What’s your phone number?” (This usually happens at a later stage, after the target’s feeling comfortable with the groomer. NEVER give out personal information online.)

“If you don’t... [do what I ask], I’ll... [tell your parents OR share your photos in a photo blog / Webcam directory / file-sharing network]” (intimidation)

“You are the love of my life.” (what “Amy,” 15, fell for before traveling out of state to meet someone who’d groomed her—see “Amy’s Story” at Netsmartz.org).

