

NSPCC Safeguarding in Education Service

Briefing: The role of schools, colleges and academies in protecting children from grooming and entrapment

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Introduction

Children spend the majority of their waking hours in school and parents place their trust in school staff giving them the primary responsibility for assisting their children to develop to their full potential. The vast majority of teachers and other school staff work tirelessly to ensure the education of future generations. There are, however, a select few who use the power inherent in their role to abuse that trust and to target vulnerable children and young people for sexual abuse.

Most schools, colleges and academies provide a safe environment for the education of children and young where there are professional relationships based on care, respect and trust. For many teachers and other school staff, promoting the social and emotional development of children is a critical and central aspect of their role and there is no doubt that many who work in education have a profound effect on the lives of their pupils.

Conversely, the power imbalance present in this influential relationship may be abused, resulting in long-term trauma for the pupil. This is particularly the case for some sex offenders who use their role in educating children and young people to target and abuse victims. If we are to prevent sexual abuse by teachers, other school staff and those who hold positions of trust in education, it is important to gain a better understanding of what grooming behaviour look in the context of those working in schools, academies and colleges.

It is therefore of critical importance that those involved in education have a greater understanding how these adults groom and entrap their pupils. This understanding will assist schools to develop and enforce effective safeguarding policies and engage in safe practices to prevent abusive behaviour from occurring and deal more appropriately with concerning behaviours when they are identified.

Responsibilities of schools, academies and colleges

School legal responsibilities:

Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (2013) sets out the duty of schools and colleges in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of pupils under section 175 of the Education Act 2002. The same duty applies to independent schools, academies and free schools under section 157 of the same act.

The 2006 DCSF guidance “Safeguarding children and safer recruitment in education” Annex A reinforces that:

‘Under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 it is an offence for a person over 18 (e.g. teacher, youth worker) to have a sexual relationship with a child under 18 where that person is in a position of trust in respect of that child, even if the relationship is consensual. This applies where the child is in full-time education and the person works in the same establishment as the child, even if s/he does not teach the child’.

Creating a culture that enables concerns about safeguarding and child protection to be expressed and addressed may include whistle blowing procedures. Clear expectations of staff behaviour should be set out in a code of conduct.

What is grooming?

While there are a number of definitions for grooming it is generally recognised as a process by which an individual prepares a child for abuse. This is usually perpetrated by a significant adult in the child’s life either at home or somewhere else in the child’s environment.

Grooming is a conscious, purposeful, and carefully planned approach used by the offender to gain access to the child, gain the child’s trust and compliance and maintain the child’s secrecy to provide opportunities to abuse and reduce the likelihood of being reported or discovered. This process is thought to strengthen the offender’s abusive pattern of behaviour, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions.

What does grooming look like in the context of education?

Those in education who sexually abuse tend to give attention to and show affection to potential victims, behaving in a manipulative and coercive manner rather than using violence. They use and abuse their position of trust and authority to befriend pupils and gradually desensitise them to sexualised behaviour, facilitating offending and reducing the likelihood of disclosure.

In the context of education, the process of grooming begins when an abuser targets or selects a victim. The selection of the victim is influenced by the compliance of the pupil and the likelihood of secrecy. Offenders tend to target pupils who they can control. Most children respond to positive attention from a teacher or member of staff, and the praise of teachers can have a huge influence. Victims are often selected because the offender perceives them as vulnerable, isolated, and/or emotionally needy.

“I look for a child who seems to be lonely or sad or looking for attention. Then I take my time gaining her trust and becoming her friend. In time she will do anything I ask.”

Quote from an abuser

Pupils who are not getting on well with their parents or who are experiencing some type of emotional difficulty are often targeted not only because they might be responsive to the initial approach from someone in a position of trust, but also because they may be more likely to maintain silence.

In education the offender may begin grooming by giving the pupil special attention, support, or rewards. The power of such rewards to affect the pupil should not be underestimated. Rewards from a teacher or other member of school staff may have a significant impact on the pupil's motivation and understanding. Rewarding for the purposes of grooming may take place in the context of providing the pupil with additional help, mentoring, advice in relation to a project or coursework, or opportunities for out of school activities, including overnight outings.

The offender uses these legitimate aspects of their role to subtly introduce and increase sexually related communication. This may be done by bringing up sexual matters in discussion, leaving materials related to sex out where the victim can see them or exploiting the victim's natural curiosity or uncertainty about sex. Touching and physical contact with the victim is gradually increased to test the child's ability to maintain secrecy and to desensitise the child through progressive sexual behaviours. The offender may also strive to provide the pupil with experiences that are valuable so that the pupil will be reluctant to lose or damage the relationship.

Grooming may also involve the parents of the victim so that that the offender can gain their trust and approval. This will allow the offender to have greater access to the victim and enhanced ability to spend time alone with them. Parents are often pleased about the extra attention the teacher is giving their child, perceiving them as a positive authority figure and role model for their child.

However offenders may also carefully groom victims by systematically separating them from family and peers. The offender may come to represent the closest relationship the victim has, particularly if the victim is socially isolated or emotionally vulnerable. In such cases, the victim may be reticent to give up what he or she views as a “loving” relationship. Once isolated, victims are more easily exploited and manipulated into sexual relationships.

Some potential **warning signs of sexual abuse** in the context of education include:

- A pupil receiving special attention or preferential treatment
- Excessive time spent alone with a pupil outside of the classroom
- Frequently spending time with a pupil in private or isolated areas
- Transporting a pupil possibly to or from school
- Making friends with a pupils parents and visiting their home
- Acting as a particular pupil's “listening ear”
- Giving small gifts, money, toys, cards, letters to a pupil
- Using texts, telephone calls, e-mails or social networking sites to inappropriately communicate with a pupil
- Overly affectionate behaviour with a pupil

- Flirtatious behaviour or making suggestive remarks or comments of a sexual nature around a pupil
- Other pupils are suspicious and make jokes or references

Who grooms children in the context of education?

Abusers come from all sections of society and are often perceived by others as respectable, reliable and trustworthy people. Research indicates that the majority of those offending in the context of education were classroom teachers and coaches but bus drivers, administrators, and others affiliated with the school may also sexually offend.

Research in the United Kingdom conducted by Gallagher (2000) about institutional abuse, found that teachers represented the largest occupational group of sexual abusers (29%). He reported that teachers who sexually offended were male (96%), generally offended alone, were approximately 40 to 49 years old at the time of reporting. He also indicated that offenders most often abused single victims, and these were usually girls between 12 and 17 years of age. In more recent times however, there has been increased media focus on females who have sexual relationships with their pupils.

Knoll (2010) reports on a review of the literature relevant to educator abuse in Canada undertaken by Shakeshaft (2004) which identified two distinct profiles for those who sexually abused within primary and post primary settings. Those who abused children in primary schools were often high achievers in the profession who had been recognised with awards for their teaching efforts. It was theorised that this type of abuser worked at being recognised as a good teacher to secure trust and an irreproachable reputation in order to further their goal of sexual misconduct. By contrast, teachers who abused pupils of post primary / secondary age may or may not be viewed as outstanding teachers. At this level sexual abuse was thought to be less premeditated and planned and more often a result of bad judgment, though still abusive.

What is the impact of abuse perpetrated by teachers?

There is a large body of research on the detrimental impact of childhood sexual abuse in the short and long term but there has been little focus on the impact of sexual abuse by teachers or other school staff. However, some believe that sexual abuse by teachers has dynamics similar to incest, and that abuse results in a loss of trust in adults and authority figures. This in turn may lead to the victim having difficulty forming future intimate relationships.

Some abused pupils have reported that the abuse was particularly harmful because their trust was betrayed by someone whom they admired, saw as an authority figure, and felt was someone they could turn to. The victim's feelings of self-blame and guilt often leads to depression, poor social efficacy, and general abuse related fears.

This negative and detrimental impact on the child may also impact on parents and other family members. Parents of children who have been victims of sexual abuse by teachers may suffer from intense guilt and emotional distress, which may impair their ability to effectively respond to their child's needs.

What can be done to prevent sexual abuse in the school setting?

Sexual abuse by a teacher or another member of school staff presents a number of particular challenges. Individuals in these positions of trust have opportunities for unsupervised access to potential victims and tend to be trusted by their colleagues, pupils, and parents making this group of offenders difficult to detect. Victims may also be less likely to report the offence.

By having a better understanding of the behaviour of sexual offenders those involved in education can place a number of obstacles in their way. For example:

Recruitment and selection

Effective recruitment and selection procedures for staff/volunteers help screen out and discourage those whose behaviour may have already identified them as unsuitable to work with children from applying to work in your school. School leaders and member of Boards of Government should ensure that they have training on and comply with safe recruitment practices for staff, volunteers and others who come into contact with children in your school.

You may also want to consider using Value Based Interviewing as part of the selection process which would assist you to identify those candidates who have positive safeguarding attitudes and values and who are more likely to identify and address safeguarding issues at work, creating a safer environment for children. Rigorous selection processes makes it clear to the applicant at the outset that your school/college is proactive in creating a culture of safeguarding within the school.

NSPCC offer [Value Based Interviewing training](#) on request.

Safeguarding policies and procedures

If you want to create a positive and safe environment for children in your school, it is vital to have clear guidelines or a code of conduct for all those involved: staff, volunteers, pupils and parents/carers. It is essential that everyone involved in your school community knows what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. When expectations are clear, individuals who are not adhering to this standard of practice can be challenged. It is important that your school has procedures in place for dealing with child protection concerns, disclosures or allegations in order to support staff/volunteers, young people and parents through the process of reporting any concerns.

Furthermore it is essential for schools to keep accurate records of all incidents and concerns arising in relation to members of staff or volunteers. The significance of each seemingly small piece of information is only appreciated when all the information is considered and patterns of behaviour are detected. Whole school staff, volunteers and parents must be made aware of the appropriate avenues for pursuing complaints when they are unsatisfied with the internal response to their concern.

All sections of the school community need to be made aware, in an appropriate way, of the policy and procedures and their responsibilities. Paramount is the understanding that the safety and welfare of the child is the priority and that any concern about the behaviour of a member of staff or other adult working in school must be reported immediately.

Schools should publicise Helplines and Advice / Support Services that are available at national and local levels.

Training and development

Governors, whole school staff and volunteers should receive safeguarding training providing the knowledge and skills appropriate to their role. Attendance at and impact of the training should be monitored and the content of training should be updated and

NSPCC offer a range of child protection and safeguarding training.

All staff and volunteers working in your school (including those with designated safeguarding responsibilities) should have a good awareness of and work to *Guidance for Safer Working Practices for Adults who Work with Children and Young People in Educational Settings* issued in March 2009 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to promote safer working practices for adults who work with children and young people in education settings. They should also have safeguarding training to ensure that they have:

- A good understanding of safeguarding issues including the causes of abuse, neglect or harm.
- Knowledge of the signs/indicators that should alert them to the possibility of abuse including grooming behaviour.
- A clear understanding of how to effectively respond when they have concerns or receive a disclosure including appropriate communication with children and record keeping requirements.
- A good understanding of the schools reporting procedures including the role of the Designated Senior Person (in Northern Ireland these roles are the Designated and Deputy Designated Teachers), the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) (or the Child Protection Support Service for Schools (CPSSS) in Northern Ireland) and the roles of external agencies that may need to become involved during the process.
- Opportunities to explore issues such as professional practice and individual staff responsibilities, the use of whistle-blowing procedures and dealing with confidentiality.

Preventative education

This should be embedded in the curriculum and ethos in your school. Schools should make effective use of opportunities in the curriculum to help children and young people understand what constitutes abuse and to raise awareness of behaviors that are of concern or unacceptable and teach children and parents how to seek help appropriately. Schools should not avoid the potentially sensitive area of sexual abuse as research indicates that there are gaps in children's knowledge with regard to keeping themselves safe from sexual abuse. Prevention education should include a comprehensive e-safety education programme for everyone in the school.

Creating a safe environment and culture in the school

Schools should be aware of the critical importance of promoting the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people if they are to achieve their potential rather than focus

exclusively on attainment. It is therefore essential to create a safe environment in your school for whole school staff and pupils. A culture of openness and transparency should be promoted which in turn encourages vigilance and a sense of shared responsibility for the safeguarding of pupils.

This culture promotes listening and open communication whereby pupils, parents/carers and all staff, irrespective of their role are facilitated to communicate about worries, are listened to and their concerns are taken seriously. Contact names and numbers for internal and external support services should be made available to ensure that pupils and their families know who they can talk to if they are worried. Those who work in schools should be assured that they can share any concerns about the conduct of colleagues and that these will be received in a sensitive manner.

Handling an allegation of grooming and entrapment by a member of staff or adult working in the school

The framework for managing allegations is set out in chapter 2 of Working Together to Safeguard Children (2013)

The additional government guidance 'Dealing with allegations of abuse against teachers and other staff' (2011) is also available.

Northern Ireland - Circular 1999/10 Pastoral Care in Schools provides advice and guidance to schools on their responsibilities in relation to child protection.

References

Gallagher, B. (2000). The extent and nature of known cases of institutional child sexual abuse. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 795–817.

Knoll, J. (2010). Teacher Sexual Misconduct: Grooming Patterns and Female Offenders. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 19:371–386, 2010

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Guidance for Safer Working Practices for Adults who Work with Children and Young People in Educational Settings*

Concerned about the behaviour of someone you know?

If abuse remains a secret, abusers will continue to abuse. If someone speaks about the abuse, this allows us to end this abuse, support the child, and may open the door to treatment for the abuser, leading to positive change and them becoming safer citizens.

Useful links

[NSPCC](http://www.nspcc.org.uk) - 0808 800 5000

[ChildLine](http://www.childline.gov.uk) - 0800 1111

[Stop It Now!](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk) - 0808 1000 900