

Chapter 17

Child Abuser's Threats and Grooming Techniques

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“Grooming” (also known as “entrapment,” “engagement,” “subjection,” etc.) might be thought of as a seduction stage which can precede incidences of child sexual abuse (e.g., Budin & Johnson, 1989; Burgess & Holmstrom, 1980; Conte, Wolf, & Smith, 1989; Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995). During this stage, child molesters may use various techniques which function to gain access to the child, increase the child's compliance with the sexual abuse, and also decrease the likelihood of the child disclosing the abuse to anyone. Child abusers may also use threats during the grooming process and subsequently during the abuse to keep the child compliant as well as prevent the child from disclosing (e.g., Elliott et al., 1995; Faller, 1988). It is unclear what percentage of abusive acts are preceded by a grooming process and what percentage are not. For example, it may be the case that grooming processes are used by some abusers initially and then are abandoned. Obviously, not all abuse incidents are preceded by grooming and thus the absence of grooming does not mean that abuse has not taken place. In addition it is not known what variables affect whether a grooming process is present or not or the details of the grooming processes. These are important empirical questions.

Although there is no current consensus on a definition of grooming, several empirical studies have examined the various techniques that child molesters commonly use to aid in committing abuse (for a more complete discussion, see Bennett & O'Donohue, *in press*). Sexual grooming can be conceptualized as the techniques through which child abusers gain access to their future victims and prepare them to be compliant with the abuse (Brackenridge, 2001; Gillespie, 2002). The current grooming definitions used in the field vary, including criteria such as preparing the child for the abuse, gaining the child's trust, or making it difficult for the child to resist or disclose the abuse. Some definitions rely on concrete examples

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(e.g., “presenting the activity as a game or something that is ‘special’ and fun”; Sgroi, 1982). Other definitions are much more abstract (e.g., “the process of predisposing a boy to sexual abuse by means of subtle or blatant interactions that lead to boundary diffusion and role confusion” Spiegel, 2003). The correct identification of grooming behaviors thus suffers from the definitional confusion. That is, behaviors considered grooming under one definition may not be classified as such under another definition.

Partly due to this confusion, the exact prevalence rates of grooming are not known. Additionally, CSA tends to be underreported in general, and thus many grooming techniques may exist of which we have limited knowledge. From cases that have been reported, studies show that prevalence rates of grooming behaviors in cases where sexual abuse occurred can range from 35 (Gallagher, 2000) to 61 % (Berliner & Conte, 1990). In addition, as we will discuss more below, no matter what definition of grooming is used, currently there is not an attendant psychometrically sound assessment methodology to measure the presence or absence of grooming behaviors.

Recently, Bennett and O'Donohue (in press) presented a proposed solution to the definitional problems of the grooming construct: grooming should be defined as “antecedent inappropriate behavior that functions to increase the likelihood of future sexual abuse.” Thus, according to this definition, assessment of a grooming behavior would include: (1) determining that the adult's behavior is inappropriate in and of itself; and (2) reasonably arguing that the function of this inappropriate behavior is to increase the likelihood of future abusive contact. Ideally, this definition should help interviewers and clinicians correctly identify grooming behaviors.

The offender's use of such grooming and threatening methods may affect how a child victim presents during a forensic interview. The child may not entirely realize that what the offender did was wrong either in the grooming process or possibly even the abusive contact, especially if the offender groomed the child to believe as such. It is also possible that the child wholeheartedly believes the any threats the offender made and is thus willing to deny the abuse occurred in order to protect him or herself or a loved one. This chapter will review the empirical literature regarding what is known about grooming and threatening techniques, as well as provide suggestions on what to look for in a forensic interview regarding evidence of such techniques.

What to Look for in a Forensic Interview

It is important to recognize that determining whether or not an alleged offender's behaviors can be considering grooming is a complicated task. In general, many grooming behaviors can appear to be normal within the context of a healthy adult-child relationship (Hartill, 2009). For example, gift giving and compliments can be normal, but it is also possible that they are intended to coerce the child into complying with the abuse. Offenders tend to engage in grooming techniques that are as

“normal” as possible in order to gain the child’s compliance and later silence, as well as to mitigate any suspicions that the child’s family or caregivers may hold.

The identification of grooming or threatening behaviors can help aid the investigation of a sexual abuse allegation. Thus, when conducting a forensic interview, it may be important to ask the child about his or her relationship with the perpetrator prior to the abuse. For example, did the alleged offender give the child special attention or bribes? Did he or she engage in lots of physical, but maybe not sexual, acts such as wrestling or other touching with the child? The following categories are areas that have been identified in the empirical literature as common areas where grooming may occur.

Special Attention or Bribery

Common techniques that many sex offenders admit to using to gain the compliance of their victims include some use of inappropriate attention or bribery. Specifically, some offenders have admitted to using a nice and nonthreatening voice and listening to the child as a grooming strategy (Conte et al., 1989). Additionally, in one study, over three-quarters of the sample of 72 sex offenders admitted to acting like the child’s friend (Budin & Johnson, 1989). Furthermore, Gallagher (2000) reviewed 65 cases of substantiated institutional abuse (i.e., sexual abuse that occurs between a child and a person who works with them in a residential home). He found that in 22 % of these cases, the offender admitted to giving the child extra attention.

Offenders may also offer to teach the child how to play a game, sport, or musical instrument. Additionally, offenders may use gifts or bribes such as money, toys, candy, cigarettes, beer, or drugs (Budin & Johnson, 1989; Gallagher, 2000). These gifts may be given with the intent of gaining the child’s trust or possibly in exchange for sexual favors. The offender may also offer to take the child out for an outing or to drive the child home (Elliott et al., 1995; Gallagher, 2000). In one study, prevalence rates for such attention and bribery grooming behaviors (in sample of 91 child molesters) ranged from 46 to 53 %, meaning that nearly half of these offenders engaged the use of these grooming techniques prior to committing their abusive acts (Elliott et al., 1995).

Offenders have also admitted to purposefully using love and affection to gain the child’s trust (Elliott et al., 1995). They may also use phrases such as “If you love me you’d let me do it” in order to coerce the child into complying with the abusive acts (Conte et al., 1989). However, the attention that offenders give may also take on a negative tone. Spiegel (2003) noted that primarily in male victims, perpetrators may use name-calling words such as “fag” or “whore” to put the child down and make him feel ashamed and thus less likely to disclose the abuse.

Finally, it should be noted that CSA victims as well report high rates of being groomed prior to the abuse occurring. For example, Berliner and Conte (1990) interviewed 23 CSA victims and found that the almost all of the victims reported some type of experience of being bribed or coerced into compliance with the abuse.

For instance, over half of the victims in this study reported that their abusers made excuses to spend time alone with them; were told that they were special, different, or the only one who understood the abuser; or reported that their abusers gave them special privileges which made them feel obligated to be compliant in the abuse. About one-third of the victims reported that their abuser prevented them from having friends or doing activities that other children do; or that their abuser treated them "meaner" than other children.

Sexual Desensitization

Another common strategy that offenders may use to make a child compliant with sexual abuse is sexual desensitization. According to Berliner and Conte (1990), sexual desensitization tends to occur gradually. Normal physical or affectionate contact such as bathing, snuggling, or tickling may eventually progress into sexual touching and then possibly into more intrusive forms of sexual abuse. In fact, almost two-thirds of the children in this study reported that at first the genital touching seemed accidental. It should be noted, however, that a few of the victims in this study reported that the shift from normal touching to sexual abuse was abrupt and thus the period of gradual sexual desensitization was either small or nonexistent,

Offenders have also endorsed using the sexual desensitization tactic. For example, the offender may start talking to the child about sex or offer to bathe or clothe the child alone (Elliott et al., 1995). In this same study, about a quarter of offenders who babysat their victims admitted to using these grooming techniques. Additionally, almost a third of the offenders admitted to asking the child for help with something, such as undressing. Almost half admitted to talking about sex with the child or "accidentally" touching the child.

Offenders also admitted to using pornographic videos and magazines to desensitize the child to sex. Interestingly, Spiegel (2003) noted that the use of pornography in sexually desensitizing children is more common with male victims than with female victims. Sometimes the offender may tell the child that he or she is teaching the child sex education and will engage the use of pornography and touching the child's body to do so (Berliner & Conte, 1990). However, it is also the case that showing pornography to a child is abuse in and of itself and not a part of a grooming process preparatory to abuse. It may however be preparatory to more severe abuse such as contact abuse.

Commonly, offenders will gradually increase physical contact to increase the child's compliance with the abuse (Gallagher, 2000). For example, the offender may begin by wrestling, kissing, massaging, or snuggling the child, all while evaluating the child's reaction to the touching. If the child feels uncomfortable and asks the offender to stop, the offender may stop for a little while and then gradually increase contact again (Conte et al., 1989; Elliott et al., 1995). Offenders also admit to making a game out of the abuse, e.g., Red Light, Green Light. In this situation, the offender may begin touching up the child's leg until the child protests (Conte et al., 1989).

Other common techniques that the offender may use to desensitize the child include the offender “accidentally” showing his or her naked body to the child, making sexual comments about the child’s body or clothing, or telling the child about previous sexual encounters that he or she has had (Berliner & Conte, 1990).

Boundary Violations

Offenders may also use techniques that violate the child’s privacy and personal boundaries. For example, in the Berliner and Conte (1990) interviews, 70 % of victims reported that their abuser “accidentally” came into their bedroom or bathroom while the child was undressing. Additionally, if the offender is a caregiver for the child, he or she may refuse to allow the child to close doors for privacy. The offender may also inspect the child’s body “to see how it is developing.” Almost a quarter of the victims also indicated that their abusers put lotion or ointment on them when they were alone.

Furthermore, particularly in father–daughter incest, offending fathers may insist on being the sole person to bathe their daughters (Christiansen & Blake, 1990). These baths will then frequently involve inappropriate sexual behavior. Offending fathers may also insist on dressing their daughters or on watching them get dressed or use the bathroom.

Grooming the Child’s Environment

Offenders may not focus grooming techniques solely on the victim; indeed they may also attempt to groom those in the child’s environment (e.g., parents or family). Nearly half of offenders in one study admitted to isolating their victims through babysitting (Elliott et al., 1995). Twenty percent of the offenders in this study also admitted to purposefully gaining the trust of the child’s family in order to abuse the child. Additionally, offenders may use strategies such as the “foot in the door technique” to win over the parents of an intended victim (Van Dam, 2001). For example, the offender may attend the child’s birthday party uninvited but appear very friendly and play games with the children there. The child’s parents would most likely allow the offender to stay as asking him to leave might appear rude.

Common Threats Used

Offenders may also commonly use threats to make the child compliant or to keep him or her from telling anyone about the abuse. The offender may threaten physical harm to the child. These threats may range from any type of physical injury to the

child (e.g., “I’ll cut off your fingers”) to threats of death (Berliner & Conte, 1990). The offender may also threaten physical harm or death to a family member or friend of the child (Faller, 1988). Threats of physical harm may also take the form of the child witnessing the offender be physically violent with another person. For example, if the offender is a father, the child victim may see him be violent towards the child’s mother. Offenders may also use their physical size to intimidate the child or hold the child still (Conte et al., 1989). Additionally, this type of physical harm threat may take the form in which the offender harms an animal and tells the child the same will happen to him or her if the abuse is disclosed. For example, in one study, one victim disclosed that the offender made her eat stew made from a pet rabbit, threatening that he would make a stew out of her if she disclosed the abuse (Faller, 1988).

Furthermore, the offender may threaten the child with abandonment, rejection, or other emotional consequences, e.g., “Your mother will be mad at you” (Berliner & Conte, 1990). The offender may also threaten that the child will lose friends or the offender’s love if the child does not comply with the abuse. Additionally, the offender may threaten that the child will be institutionalized if he or she discloses the abuse (Budin & Johnson, 1989). Conversely, the offender may threaten the child with negative consequences to him or herself. For example, the offender may threaten suicide, or that the offender will be thrown in jail or murdered if the child tells (Berliner & Conte, 1990).

The offender may also use “scary person” or “scary place” threats (Faller, 1988). In “scary person” types of threats, the offender makes statements in which he or she takes on special powers. For example, an offender may say that he is “stronger than the Incredible Hulk” (p. 293) and thus the child should not attempt to be noncompliant or to disclose the abuse. This type of threat could also take the form of the offender dressing in a certain way to scare the child (e.g., the offender dresses herself as a witch). In “scary place” type threats, the offender tells the child that he or she will be sent to a frightening place if the abuse is disclosed. Using Faller (1988)’s example, the offender may make a child crawl inside an oven and threaten to cook the child if he or she discloses the abuse.

Finally, the offender may threaten that the child’s family will suffer emotional consequences. For example, the offender may tell the child that his or her family will be forever shamed if they find out that their child was abused (Berliner & Conte, 1990). Offenders may also tell the child that his or her parents will get divorced if the child does not cooperate (Budin & Johnson, 1989).

Special Case: Teacher Sexual Abuse

Although many of the grooming techniques used in teacher sexual abuse cases are similar to that of other cases, subtle differences exist. In particular, the grooming behaviors may seem particularly normal in this type of abuse case, as students are expected to spend time with their teachers and many parents are in fact grateful when a teacher gives a student extra attention (Shakeshaft, 2004), as this seems

likely to further the student's education. An additional complexity that Shakeshaft pointed out is that in teacher sexual abuse, even if there is suspicion of grooming behaviors, a teacher giving attention to a student is legitimate within the responsibilities of the occupation, and thus cannot lead to any disciplinary action.

Similar to other types of grooming behaviors, teacher sexual offenders often use bribery against their intended victims. They tend to give their intended victims special attention or rewards. While the use of bribery is occurring, these offenders also typically begin to converse about sexual matters with their intended victims (Knoll, 2010). Teacher sexual offenders also tend to coerce their victims by providing additional help on projects or taking them for outings (Shakeshaft, 2004). Finally, teacher sexual offenders may also attempt to groom the student's environment by manipulating the relationship with the intended victim's parents, thus gaining approval to spend time alone with the student (Knoll, 2010).

Questions to Ask During the Forensic Interview

Examination of the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol (taken from Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007) revealed that there are no specific questions related to grooming in the current protocol. It is important to elicit information about grooming from the child within the forensic interview without assuming that grooming did or did not take place. If within the interview the child mentions some sort of incident that *could* be grooming-related (e.g., "He asked me to play red light green light") it would be important to respond with an open-ended query, such as "Tell me all about that."

If the child does not mention any incidents that sound like grooming, it may still be possible to ask about such occurrences towards the end of the interview, as not to contaminate any part of the allegation about the abusive incidents. Open-ended prompts such as "Tell me about your relationship with [the alleged perpetrator] before [the incidents] happened" can be utilized. However, if the child does not give a detailed response, it may be reasonable to ask more focused questions such as:

- "Did you and [the alleged perpetrator] play games where you touched each other? Tell me everything about that."
- "Did [the alleged perpetrator] ever give you presents? Tell me all about that."
- "Did [the alleged perpetrator] give you baths or help you get undressed? Tell me all about that."
- "Did [the alleged perpetrator] tell you something bad would happen if you told someone what he was doing? Tell me about that."
- "Did [the alleged perpetrator] tell you that you would get in trouble if you told someone what he was doing? Tell me everything about that."

It is important to remember is that once such questions are asked, an answer of "yes" does not mean that grooming necessarily occurred. Many of these behaviors, such as bathing or dressing, occur within the context of normal adult-child relationships.

As discussed in Bennett and O'Donohue ([in press](#)), to be considered grooming, the behavior should be shown to be inappropriate in and of itself and that the function of this inappropriate behavior is to increase the likelihood of future abusive contact.

Again, no grooming assessment with valid psychometric properties currently exists. Bennett & O'Donohue are now working on developing a measure based on their proposed definition. This assessment device will be a clinical tool, similar to a decision tree, in which the possible grooming behavior is subjected to various questions (e.g., "Is it inappropriate?" or "Were there alternative choices?"). Ultimately, the behavior would fall into one of three categories: (1) definitely grooming, (2) definitely not grooming, or (3) unclear. Furthermore, it is planned that this device will be subjected to empirical study to determine sensitivity and specificity, as well as reliability and validity.

Mistakes to Avoid

Common judgment and decision-making errors may result in a biased forensic interview. An important error to avoid when conducting a forensic interview, especially with regards to grooming behavior, is that of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias has been defined as "the tendency to prefer information that is consistent with a hypothesis rather than to information that opposes it" (Plous, 1993, p. 233). This means that if an interviewer questions the child with a hypothesis already in mind (e.g., that the child was sexually abused), then the interviewer may pay more attention to and be more likely to believe any information that the child offers which confirms the interviewer's hypothesis. The interviewer may also be less likely to believe or attend to any information that contradicts the hypothesis. In terms of grooming, it could be easy for such an interviewer to attend to the instances in which the alleged offender gave the child gifts and to ignore other crucial information such as the fact that the gifts were given only on birthdays and holidays. Leading questions can be a result of confirmation bias within an interview, and have been shown to lead to an increased risk of false testimony (Powell, Garry, & Brewer, 2009).

Another possible problem in assessing whether or not grooming has taken place is the common use of the representativeness heuristic. Kahneman and Tversky (1972) explained that people use the representativeness heuristic when they judge the probability of an event by its characteristics' similarity to those of the parent population. A frequently used example demonstrating this heuristic is "Nancy is a shy, single woman who loves to read. Is Nancy more likely to be a lawyer or a librarian?" Most people would answer that she is more likely to be a librarian, as her characteristics seem similar to that of a prototypical librarian. However, in terms of sheer probabilities, Nancy is more likely to be a lawyer as there are many more lawyers than librarians. In terms of grooming, a father's lavish birthday gift to his young daughter may appear similar to grooming techniques that are used by offenders—i.e., special attention and bribery. The problem here is that the giving of lavish birthday gifts occurs much more frequently as an act of kindness rather than a

grooming behavior. Thus, one must be wary of the tendency to ignore base rates when judging the probability of an event.

Additionally, the use of the “post hoc ergo propter hoc” fallacy (i.e., “after this, therefore because of this”) can contribute to problems that arise during forensic interviews regarding grooming techniques. To clarify, if a child alleges sexual abuse, and then it is discovered that the offender had been giving the child candy prior to the alleged abuse, many people would come to the conclusion that the candy-giving was obviously a grooming technique and thus abuse must have occurred. Candy-giving does not predictably result in sexual abuse (i.e., not all adults who give a child candy go on to sexually abuse that child); however, it is a technique that may be used by offenders. Thus, it is important to interpret such grooming behaviors with caution—questioning the child about the offender's grooming behaviors may help guide understanding of the allegation but cannot confirm that abuse did in fact occur.

Conclusion

The exact prevalence rates of grooming behaviors in cases of sexual abuse are not currently known, as CSA in general tends to be underreported and even then the allegations may not include details of the grooming behaviors. However, considerable support from empirical studies shows that rates of grooming generally tend to fall between 35 (Gallagher, 2000) to 61 % (Berliner & Conte, 1990). Additionally, in one study, 39 % of offenders admitted to using threats against their victims (Elliott et al., 1995). Thus, it is fairly likely that in any particular CSA case, any type of grooming or threatening technique was used. Within a forensic interview context, it would be important to ask the child if any of the behaviors covered in this chapter occurred during his or her relationship with the alleged perpetrator. Importantly, common errors in judgment and decision-making such as confirmation bias, representativeness heuristic, and post hoc reasoning should be avoided.

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