

The Language of Online Grooming

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In previous articles we have looked at the similarities between online grooming and offline grooming. We can see correlations between some of the potentially risky behaviors that those with personal contact with potential victims exhibit and the behaviors and actions of those who contact children through the Internet. However, there is one area that is dramatically expanded in online grooming and researchers in London have been doing some interesting research to discover just how different or similar it is.



The primary tool for online grooming is language. Research has been conducted into the language that is common among predators regardless of the environment. Some of that research has resulted in software development that seeks certain phrases and words to attempt to weed out predators from children's online contact. However, recent research is giving us a new insight into the skills, abilities and focus of online predators in the grooming process. The studies being conducted by three researchers at Swansea University in the UK are bringing together three different disciplines to look at the actual language being used in the online chats. In our efforts to find ways to prevent abuse, we hope to learn more about how predators lure and trap children.¹

A review of just one of their articles tells us a great deal about online predators and the way they gain access to our children. The study offered three propositions:

- 1) Online groomers are likely to be more direct in their solicitation of sexual behavior than offline groomers,
- 2) Online groomers use a variety of strategies to develop trust in their relationships with potential victims,
- 3) Online groomers use different methods of assessing the willingness of potential victims to take risks than offline groomers' use.²

To study this issue, the researchers used chat logs from 24 randomly-selected chats. The participants included adult volunteers from an organization formed to fight online predators, and online predators themselves.³ Although the volunteers were adults, the online groomers were convinced they were interacting with children.⁴

There are many valuable findings in the research. However, for the purposes of this article, we will focus on the unique aspects of the way predators develop trust online using only language.

Deceptive trust development is a phrase used to describe a process whereby groomers disguise their primary intention to engage a child in sexual behavior by appearing to be cultivating a personal, friendly relationship with the child.⁵ The researchers found that there are unique aspects of online grooming that are important to note. First, there is a much greater use of explicit sexual language earlier in the online conversation versus an in-person conversation. This is, in part, to desensitize the potential victim, but also serves as sexual gratification for the predator during the grooming process in a way that offline predators do not experience.⁶

Second, there is a great deal more of complimenting potential victims and reinforcing their self-image as a way of strengthening the sociability of the interactions. Compliments were used to build trust, desensitize the children, and mentally or emotionally isolate them from others.⁷

Third, throughout the conversation there is an emphasis on gauging the potential victim's seeming compliance.⁸ This means that throughout the interaction, groomers are saying things to learn about the level of trust they are achieving—rather than waiting, as offline groomers do, to establish a level of trust before stepping over the line.⁹ One particular way that was often employed was language that seemed to leave decision making to the child. A predator might say, for example, "just an idea, it's up to you" or let's "meet somewhere public where it's safe."¹⁰ All these techniques are designed to ensure that victims do not tell anyone about the relationship with the groomer/predator. In the offline situation, the potential predator is working in a more linear fashion—waiting to make sure there is trust and secrecy before moving forward and relying on visual cues as well as language. Online the strategies are more complex and difficult to distinguish one from another, but taken together they move the process forward with greater velocity and all the while the predator is experiencing sexual gratification as the grooming continues.

There is a great deal more for us to learn from this research. It is important to remember that monitoring the online communication of children via chats, apps, gaming websites, etc., is very important. Research has demonstrated that although young people know what to do and not to do online, they pay little attention to the risks.¹¹ Learning all we can about how predators groom children through online contact is key to keeping them safe at all times. Language is an online groomer's valuable tool for grooming online. The more we know the more we can put a stop to them.