

# The Grooming Process

How can you be sure who you're talking to online? Internet predators use what is known as the grooming process to create seemingly safe online relationships and then betray that friendship by attempting to break down barriers and cause harm.

Online predators find their "prey" by going to chat rooms where young people gather or by searching online profiles for a specific type of victim.

Predators use a process to "groom" their victims, which usually follows this pattern:

(1) Establishes similar Interests through chatting or instant messaging. This leads to more private communication like e-mail and phone calls.

(2) Builds trust. A predator counts on the fact that establishing so much in common with an online friend will lead to a trusting relationship. A predator is hoping that you will develop such a trust that you will separate yourself from your true friends and family.

(3) Keeps it a secret. It is a predator's goal to keep the friendship a secret from others. Engaging in a secret friendship like this leaves you vulnerable.

(4) Breaks down barriers. A predator works on the trust that has been established and may break down barriers further by exposing you, the victim, to pictures or materials that may at first make you uncomfortable. This is a common tactic because kids and teens are naturally curious about many things. The more a victim is exposed to, the less he or she will feel that it is wrong.

(5) Makes threats. Sometimes, but not always, a predator will make threats to the intended victim to keep the relationship a secret. Online threats are against the law. Think about it: Would a real friend threaten you or your family with harm?

(6) Meets face to face. The ultimate goal of an Internet predator is to get the intended victim to meet with him or her in person. You may believe that you can never be tricked by someone you meet online, but remember that predators make it their business to learn tactics to deceive their prey. NEVER meet anyone in person who you only know online.

## **Best Advice**

Online friendships can be fun, but always consider what kind of information you are sharing.

If you notice that one of your online friendships is following the grooming process pattern, proceed very cautiously. There is no reason for an online friend to want to have a secret relationship with you and/or to force you to meet in person.

Let your friends and family know about people you meet online, and tell someone immediately if you are threatened or feel uncomfortable about anything that is said or sent online.