

Protecting God's Children for Adults

The Prevention and Mitigation of Abuse of Vulnerable Adults Part II: Grooming Behavior

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While each of us can be vulnerable in any given set of circumstances, we will look at four basic types of vulnerable persons and hear about their experiences of abuse in their own voices. As I have discussed, the term vulnerable adults can apply to people with physical, mental, or emotional conditions or an illness that renders them unable to defend, protect, or get help for themselves when injured or emotionally abused. The term applies also to the elderly, whose various circumstances make them vulnerable to those who might cause them harm.

Grooming Behavior

Sexual abuse of vulnerable adults is as complex to understand as it is for us to comprehend the molestation of children. Among vulnerable adults, the abuser's patterns are similar to the behavioral patterns of those who abuse children. In particular, there are abusers who seek out and "groom" vulnerable adults or others who, when exposed to particular situations, give into the pressures of those events by abusing others. Those abusers, most unfortunately, are primarily found among the family members, caregivers, and others who are known and trusted by the vulnerable adult.



Predators who identify and engage their victims employ grooming behavior. Grooming is a means for an offender to gain control of a vulnerable adult and bring about their cooperation. The predator carefully and patiently grooms a vulnerable adult for the type of relationship they seek. They gain the vulnerable person's trust, break down their defenses and manipulate them into performing or permitting the desired sex act or behavior they seek. If necessary, the predator will gain access to the vulnerable adult by employing the same techniques with the victim's parents or caretakers. The process is called grooming. It increases the predator's access to his victim and decreases the likelihood of discovery. Grooming occurs in three basic forms:

1. Physical
2. Psychological
3. Community

Physical grooming involves touch. The perpetrator may initially touch the vulnerable adult in completely acceptable ways and, as the victim becomes more familiar with the abuser, he or she then increases the level of sexual contact by gradually conditioning the vulnerable adult. Eventually this will lead to sexual touch. These acts are so subtle that the vulnerable adult does not realize what is happening.

Psychological grooming is equally subtle and similarly progressive. The predator may begin by showing careful and special attention to the vulnerable adult by being friendly, empathetic, or very understanding. The abuser creates a sense of dependence in the vulnerable adult by developing a special relationship with them. The perpetrator eventually convinces the vulnerable adult that they have caused the behavior the perpetrator inflicts. In many ways, it is like brainwashing the vulnerable adult. Physical threats of injury to the vulnerable adult or their family may take place. All of these techniques leave the vulnerable adult conflicted, confused, helpless and dependent.

Community grooming provides the perpetrator with the environment they need to do their manipulations. They project their image as a wonderful person to the families, employers, and others in the community. They mimic the behavior of good caregivers to get access to their victims. They do good things to accomplish a very evil act. When anyone makes a comment about the integrity of the perpetrator the community acts with outrage—not at the perpetrator, but at the accuser, because the acts seem inconceivable from this individual.

Paying careful attention to the abuser's grooming behaviors provides us with an effective tool to monitor vulnerable adults who are often too trusting. We must advocate for these persons to eradicate the risk of harm.