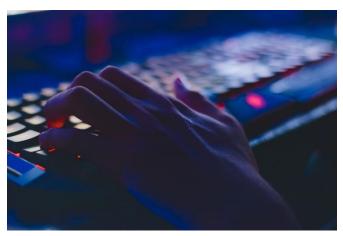# Middle School Guidance Officer

The 5 stages of online grooming – radicalising children

Over the 22 years that I worked as a police office and internet detective, I spent thousands of hours tracking the activities of online predators. Over the years, I saw a pattern emerge – there are five separate stages these aggressors follow in order to groom and radicalise their child targets. As a parent, teacher or guardian, it's important to know and recognise the steps that online predators take. Early warning signs often become evident when you know what to look for.

Stage 1: Identifying the victim

The first stage is to identify their victim. Predators will go out and 'hunt' for an ideal target that has potential to be groomed. This is all too easy in the age of social media. Before the internet, predators would need to find a child from their immediate or surrounding community. Now, there is a veritable smorgasbord of online profiles to choose from. This makes it easy for predators to browse for a victim that ticks all of their boxes. That means finding someone who fits their preferences for:

- Sex,
- Age,
- Location,
- Build, and
- Other features such as hair colour or ethnicity.
- Once they have found someone 'appropriate', they begin to build their strategy.

Stage 2: Gathering information

Now that the predator has found their target, they begin to gather information. Because so much of our socialisation happens online, this often does not take long. A lot of data can be pulled from even a heavily guarded profile. And even if a child has their profile settings kept private, information the predator may not be able to access can be pulled from the profiles of their friends. A social media connection might have posted a public photo with the child in their school uniform, for example.

Other websites that the child may visit can be mapped out, and the predator will seek out opportunities to communicate with them. This is where anonymising apps can become so dangerous. The predator will likely take the opportunity now to begin contacting their target – often, they will create false profiles, pretending to be much younger than they really are.

They will then go to great lengths to map out a psychological profile of their targets. This can be done through simple observation, or with prying questions if they are already in communication. Is the child lonely? Do they have a large or small friendship group? Do they

spend a lot of time out and about, or are they more likely to stay at home? What kinds of sentiments are they posting? What do they like? What do they dislike?

This all goes a long way to getting a sense of who the target really is, and how they might find an entry into their lives, paving the way for Stage 3.

Stage 3: Identifying and exploiting needs

Now that the predators knows everything they need to know about the child, they begin identifying weaknesses or vulnerabilities to exploit. They take a deep interest in what the child is posting and doing online, hoping to find a need that they can fill to win the child's absolute trust.

A young girl might feel that she isn't as pretty as her friends – allowing the predator to pose as a slightly older, attractive male that can bathe her in compliments and affections, for example. By showing their full commitment to the child, they can win over their trust, and break down their defences. Now, slowly but surely, they can begin to steer the conversation down a dangerous path.

Many of the predators I arrested over the years would confess that they were actively looking for children who were dissatisfied with themselves, or isolated from friends and family. Children who oversexualise themselves, or pretend to be older than they actually were, were the biggest targets. These behaviours, I learned, often indicated low self-esteem – making them prime targets.

Stage 4: Desensitisation

The next stage is desensitising the child. Lowering the child's inhibitions is essential to the final stage, and so the predator will begin to up-the-ante, gradually introducing increasingly lewd and inappropriate topics into their conversations, gauging their reactions as they go. Sending the child pornographic materials is very common – often homemade by the predator themselves.

If the child seems disturbed or frightened by the direction the conversation is going, the predator will switch tactics. Often using third party peer pressure – for example, telling their victim that 'all your friends are doing it' and that they won't want to be left behind. It is inconceivable how much long-lasting damage this can do to a child, and sickening to think of these predators deliberately and strategically destroying the innocence of a child.

Stage 5: Initiate abuse

Now that they have developed an intimate relationship with their victim, the predator will ask to meet, or request them so send them sexual photos or videos. If the child does refuse, the predator will often remind them of all the inappropriate materials or conversations that they have shared. Blackmail is common, but these predators can be so convincing and persuasive, it is not always necessary.

What can you do to protect the children in your care?

The 5 stages are systematic, and designed to break down a child's defences and innocence. It is horrifying, but all too real. Tragically, it is also all too common. Keep a close eye on the children in your care. Watch for any out-of-the-ordinary secrecy or rapid mood changes, and always ask them what they are doing online.

Remind them that they can never tell for certain who they are actually speaking to online, and not to respond to strangers under any circumstances.

Ensure their profiles privacy settings are locked down tightly – and be sure to encourage other parents and guardians to ensure their children's are locked down too! Like vaccination, online privacy requires a herd immunity – just one inoculated account won't do.

Please, also take the time to download our free online safety resource: ***5 principles to stay safe online.*** We have put together the most crucial steps all guardians should take to ensure the safety of their children in the online world.

 – *Brett Lee*