

## How will you know if you are being groomed?

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You met some new members of the parish neighbors with children the same age as yours. They seem like a very nice family. Later that week you see them at soccer practice. It turns out their seven year old boy is on the same soccer team as your son. Their situation is a bit different from yours because Mom goes to work at an office everyday and dad works from home. His schedule is more flexible than most dads and he apparently played soccer in college. It is soccer season and dad has offered to take the boys to and from practice. How do you tell if the offer is genuine or the beginning of a grooming process?

Identifying the motives of adults that are new to a child's life can be difficult but we know that assessing the motives of new people in children's lives is not only reasonable, it is critical. The bigger challenge is to maintain that vigilance and continue paying attention to the people we have grown to trust and be mindful of members of our families who have been in and out of our lives for a long time. How do you tell the difference between a compassionate adult who genuinely cares about children and a predator who only cares about his or her needs?

Child molesters are often appealing, charismatic people with a tremendous ability to win over parents, neighbors, and other adults. They use their skills and abilities to gain children's confidence and to obtain parents' trust in order to fulfill their own sexual desires. They work hard to create trusting relationships with parents and others as part of the grooming process. At the same time, they make children feel special.

A major part of the grooming process is to con parents into seeing the molester as a kind, caring, and generous person who genuinely cares about children. However, to protect children, parents must remain vigilant about **all** adults who are part of a child's life. This means being alert to all the warning signs of potential molesters. Regardless of the person's apparent good intentions or the fact that he or she seems like a good person, the key is to pay attention to behavior. When an adult exhibits potentially risky behaviors don't ignore it. Put a stop to it at once.

If the person seems to disregard or discount the rules and wishes of the parents regarding the things children are allowed to do or eat and the places they can go, call attention to it and make sure it stops. If an adult *always* seem to want to be alone with the kids, join in and change the dynamics of that group setting. Everyone that loves children prefers to spend time with them from time to time. The liveliness and joy of children can brighten a dark day. People that are a risk to kids prefer the company of children to that of adults *all* the time. Make sure that the responsibility for being with the children is rotated through all the parents.

Genuinely caring adults wait for children to reach out to them for comforting touch. They attend to the child's needs—and that is healthy interaction. Notice adults that initiate unnecessary touching or seem to coax children into situations where accidental intimate touching might happen.

The only way to know whether any adult is a child molester is to remain on alert. Pay attention to *all* the adults in a child's life. Notice risky behavior. Ask questions. Listen to children. Don't be seduced by your own tendency to overlook actions by people you want to trust. Take action to disrupt the flow if anything seems odd or out of place.

Interrupting behavior patterns requires action. It does not require hurling accusations or making threats. Join in games or conversations between adults and children. Notice when children are uncomfortable and give them a way out of those situations.

There are a great number of supportive, caring adults in our families and communities. Being alert to potentially risky behaviors does not require us to become paranoid and anxious about everyone that expresses interest in our children. Protecting our children from sexual predators necessitates that we stay alert to the behaviors of adults. Be diligent and take nothing for granted. Keep your eyes and ears open; remain alert to the potential risks. These are our best defense against the grooming practices of child molesters.

This is how we create and maintain safe environments for *all* God's children!

*Brought to you through the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. and its VIRTUS® programs with the goal to help prevent, address, and mitigate wrongdoing in the community of faith and to help adults become protectors of children and to help communities become safe havens for children.*