



Another Choice UK

Parent Awareness Guide

10 Signs That May Indicate Grooming or Exploitation

Support without judgement. Information without blame. A place to listen, ask questions and understand what to do next.

Introduction

Grooming and exploitation are not always easy to recognise. They can develop gradually and may involve friendship, attention, gifts, promises, pressure, threats or a sense of loyalty and belonging.

Young people may be influenced by strangers, people they meet online, friends, partners, older peers or even people they already know and trust. They may not recognise what is happening as exploitation, or they may feel unable to talk about it.

One sign on its own does not mean a young person is being groomed or exploited. Look for changes, patterns and combinations of behaviour that are unusual for your child.

1. Significant Changes in Behaviour

Your child may become more withdrawn, secretive, anxious, angry or defensive than usual, particularly when asked about friends, relationships or where they have been.

Rather than focusing only on the behaviour, consider **what may be happening behind the change**.

2. Unexplained Money, Gifts or Possessions

New clothes, trainers, phones, cash, food, transport or other items may appear without a clear explanation.

Grooming does not always begin with expensive gifts. Even small acts of generosity can be used to build trust or make a young person feel they owe somebody something.

3. Increased Secrecy Around Phones or Social Media

You may notice your child hiding screens, deleting messages, receiving repeated calls at unusual times, using new accounts or becoming distressed when they cannot access their phone.

Online grooming can develop quickly, even when the young person has never met the person face-to-face.

4. New Relationships or People You Know Little About

Your child may suddenly spend time with new friends, older young people or adults you know little about.

Remember that harmful influence does not always come from strangers. Friends, partners, older siblings, relatives or other trusted people can also influence a young person in ways that are not safe.

5. Staying Out Later, Going Missing or Changes in Routine

Repeated late nights, unexplained absences, missing school, staying away overnight or becoming difficult to contact may be warning signs.

Small changes can also matter when they become part of a wider pattern.

6. Travelling to Unfamiliar Places

You may notice unexplained train journeys, taxis, lifts or travel to places your child has not previously visited.

A young person may not fully understand why they are being asked to travel or what they are becoming involved in.

7. Changes in Mood, Fear or Anxiety

A young person who is being controlled or pressured may appear frightened, anxious, angry, isolated or unusually worried about upsetting a particular person.

Sometimes behaviour that appears defiant may actually be a response to fear or pressure.

8. Feeling the Need to Carry a Weapon

If a young person says they need a knife or another weapon for protection, this should always be taken seriously.

It can be helpful to ask:

“What has happened that makes you feel you need to protect yourself?”

Fear, threats, debt or pressure from others may be part of the wider picture.

9. Changes in Alcohol or Drug Use

New or increased use of alcohol or drugs can sometimes occur alongside exploitation.

Substances may be offered as part of grooming, used to create dependency or debt, or used by a young person to cope with difficult situations.

10. Avoiding Questions About Where They Have Been

Your child may become vague or defensive about where they have been, who they are with or why plans have changed.

They may fear getting into trouble, feel loyal to someone, have been told to keep secrets or simply not realise the situation is unsafe.

Pushing too hard can sometimes close the conversation. Keeping communication open may make it easier for them to talk when they are ready.

What If I Am Worried?

If you recognise several of these signs, it does **not automatically mean your child is being exploited**, but you do not need absolute proof before taking a concern seriously.

Try to stay calm, listen before reacting and ask questions without blame. Notice patterns and significant changes, keep a record of incidents that concern you and speak with the school or an appropriate safeguarding professional if you need further advice.

If you believe your child or another person is in immediate danger, contact the emergency services.

Starting the Conversation

You do not need to begin with **“Are you being groomed?”**

You might try:

“I've noticed things seem different lately. Is everything okay?”

“Has anyone been putting pressure on you to do something you don't want to do?”

“Is there anybody you're worried about upsetting or saying no to?”

“You don't have to tell me everything at once, but I'm here when you're ready.”

“Whatever has happened, we can work out what to do next.”

The aim is to **open the conversation, not conduct an interrogation.**

A Message to Parents and Carers

It is very easy to look back and ask:

“How did I not see this?”

Grooming can be gradual, hidden and deliberately difficult for the people around a young person to recognise.

Parents and carers may experience fear, guilt, anger, shame or worry about being judged. Those feelings can make asking for help even harder.

Seeking support early is not an admission of failure. It is part of protecting your child.

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Information without blame.

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About Another Choice UK

Another Choice UK is a preventative safeguarding and early-intervention programme supporting young people to recognise exploitation, coercion, harmful influences and serious youth violence, while developing safer decision-making and help-seeking skills.

We work with young people, parents and carers, schools and professionals through interactive, trauma-informed education and support.

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There is always another choice.