

‘Grooming’ behaviors

Offenders typically control their victims through a systematic process called “grooming” or seduction. Many offenders exploit a child’s vulnerabilities using a combination of tactics to gain the victim’s trust, lower inhibitions and gain cooperation and “consent.” Since the initial stages of the grooming process can occur in public or group settings, offenders also take care to groom the community, which makes it easier to gain the trust of staff and administrators. The grooming process has six steps:

1. Targeting the victim – An offender will identify a child and determine his or her vulnerabilities.
2. Gaining trust – Through watching and gathering information about the child, an offender will become acquainted with his or her needs.
3. Filling a need – Offenders will often provide lavish gifts, extra attention and affection to forge a bond with their victims.
4. Isolating the child – By developing a special relationship with the child, an offender creates situations in which he or she is alone with the child.
5. Sexualizing the relationship – An offender will desensitize a child by talking to, taking photos of and even creating situations in which both the offender and victim are touching or naked. The adult then uses a child’s curiosity and feelings of stimulation to engage in sexual activity.
6. Maintaining control – To ensure the child’s continued participation and silence, offenders can use secrecy and blame as well as other tactics. Victims sometimes continue the relationship out of fear or shame at the thought of having to tell someone about the abuse.

Since interactions between a predator and child can occur in sport settings around other people, coaches, staff members or volunteers are well positioned to witness grooming behavior. Therefore, it’s critical for all members of the sport community to be on the alert for policy violations, suspicious behavior, or other signals that an individual might be a sexual predator. Offenders will use tickling, wrestling, horseplay, photography and gift giving to push the boundaries of what’s acceptable and form connections with their victims.

All questions or concerns related to inappropriate, suspicious or suspected grooming behavior should be immediately directed to safesport@usfigureskating.org or call 719-635-5200.