



CHILD EXPLOITATION EDUCATION

GROOMING PROCESS

by WALKING WISE



NOTE TO PRESENTER

Log in to WalkingWise.com and refer to the Implementation Toolkit for classroom teaching tips.

Most importantly:

DEFINE SCHOOL POLICY

Establish a sexual exploitation reporting protocol with a trauma-informed response. The Walking Wise Implementation Toolkit provides a sample protocol.

AGE & AUDIENCE

This presentation can be edited by following the procedures on page 3 to align with your school policies, specific age groups, and the involvement of at-risk audiences.

SUPPORT PROCEDURE

Provide your students with guidance on how to access immediate help or arrange a private meeting with a social worker, counselor, nurse, school resource officer, or another trustworthy staff member to report concerns about themselves or a peer.

SECOND SAFE ADULT

Ensure a second trustworthy adult, such as a teacher, is present in the learning setting to observe student reactions and identify those who may benefit from a follow-up meeting. This person should remain focused and free from other duties during the presentation.

NOTE TO PRESENTER

This PDF contains the same content as the PowerPoint presentation but has been condensed into fewer pages for easier reference. For live presentations, please use the PowerPoint version. It reveals bullet points one at a time.

Meaningful learning takes time. By introducing topics gradually over several years, educators can create steady growth in awareness and understanding.

Our recommended teaching plan offers a long-term path for middle and high school students to build knowledge and confidence.



6-YEAR TRACK

PARENTS & STAFF

#1 Myths & Reality

6th GRADE

#2 Trustworthy vs. Unsafe Adult

#3 Grooming Process

7th GRADE

#4 Pornography Link

#5 Sextortion Scheme

8th GRADE

#6 Male Victims

#7 Runaways as Targets

#8 Rural Risks

9th GRADE

#9 Human Traffickers

#10 Female & Peer Recruiters

10th GRADE

#11 Family Secret

11th GRADE

#12 Hidden Buyers

NOTE TO PRESENTER

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- Remove the Walking Wise logo and copyright "@2026 Walking Wise" from the new slides.
- Always add your organization's name or logo to each new slide.

Please delete this instruction page before presenting to audiences.

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NOTE TO PRESENTER

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For revision requests, please email us at: support@WalkingWise.com.

SENSITIVE TOPICS WILL BE DISCUSSED

CONTENT NOTICE

We'll be discussing serious safety issues today.

Some topics may be difficult to hear.

If you ever feel uncomfortable, you can step out and speak with a trustworthy adult for support.

You're not alone—help is available.

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NOTE TO PRESENTER

Trauma-Informed Delivery Guidelines

To support a safe and effective learning environment, please follow these guidelines:

- Present the information in a calm, matter-of-fact way and avoid sensational or alarming language.
- Avoid graphic details. Focus on helping students understand behaviors, risk, and ways to stay safe.
- Never blame victims. Responsibility always belongs to the person who caused harm.
- Maintain a steady, composed tone. Students often mirror the presenter's emotional cues.
- Do not ask students to share personal experiences or disclosures.
- If students laugh or react awkwardly, respond neutrally and gently redirect the focus.
- Pair all risk information with needed resources, practical solutions, and support options.
- Reinforce that students are not alone and that trustworthy adults are available to help.

STATISTICS

Why Study Results Can Vary

- **Some crimes are never reported, making it hard to reveal the entire issue.**
- **Studies collect information in different ways, leading to different results.**
- **Small studies may not represent everyone.**

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In this presentation, we'll discuss statistics, but it's important to note that while statistics provide valuable insights into an issue, they cannot be relied upon entirely.

Here are a few reasons:

UNREPORTED

Victims often do not report the crimes committed against them due to fear, shame, retaliation, or manipulation. Also, many don't realize that what is happening to them is a crime.

INCONSISTENT COLLECTION

Areas may define sexual crimes in various ways or use different methods to collect data, making it hard to compare information.

FOCUS GROUPS

Small or specific focus groups participating in a study or survey may not accurately reflect the diversity or experiences of the broader population.

WHY LEARN ABOUT THIS



KNOWLEDGE helps keep us safe.

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Education is one of the strongest tools for prevention.

When young people understand how predators operate, they are better able to recognize manipulation and avoid dangerous situations.

Reinforce that awareness increases safety.

PREVENTION EDUCATION



SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

includes grooming,
sextortion, pornography
& sex trafficking.

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SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Taking advantage of another person for their own benefit, especially in a sexual way, often using pressure, tricks, or control.

Below are different forms of exploitation:

GROOMING

Building trust, dependency, or an emotional connection to manipulate someone.

SEXTORTION

Threatening to share embarrassing or sexual images, videos, or information to pressure someone into following demands.

PORNOGRAPHY

Involving someone in creating sexual images who is under 18, or someone who is pressured, or unable/unwilling to give consent.

SEX TRAFFICKING

Manipulating or forcing someone into sexual activity in exchange for money or something of value.

Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 (Legal Definition):

SEX TRAFFICKING is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person under the age of 18 for the purpose of a commercial sex act.

TVPA link: Retrieved April 14, 2026, from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-106hr3244e nr/pdf/BILLS-106hr3244enr.pdf>

KNOWLEDGE

Understanding tricky or unsafe behavior can increase a young person's safety.

KNOWLEDGE

Learning About Grooming

- Understanding unsafe behavior is empowering.
- It helps us recognize warning signs.
- Increases confidence to ask a trustworthy adult for help.



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The goal of this lesson is to help young people be informed, not to make them feel afraid.

Most adults are caring and want to provide protection. However, unsafe adults, older teens, or peers may try to manipulate, lie to, or take advantage of others.

By learning how grooming works, young people can better recognize unsafe behavior and feel confident asking a trustworthy adult for help.

VOCABULARY



Words to Understand

- **Groomer**
- **Mind Games**
- **Opportunist**
- **Bond**
- **Boundary**
- **Isolate**
- **Virtual Stranger**
- **Freedom**



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Understanding vocabulary terms related to the behaviors of sexual predators can empower young people to recognize warning signs of harmful situations.

Knowing these terms helps them identify manipulative tactics that unsafe people (predators/traffickers) use to build trust and exploit vulnerabilities.

With this knowledge, young people are better equipped to spot red flags, understand that these behaviors are abusive, and feel more confident reporting predators to trusted adults or authorities, potentially preventing further harm.

VOCABULARY

GROOMER

Someone who builds trust with a young person to manipulate or harm them.



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Grooming usually does not begin with obvious abuse. Instead, the person may initially act kind, supportive, or friendly. Over time, they slowly manipulate the young person.

VOCABULARY

OPPORTUNIST

A person who looks for chances to take advantage of others for their own benefit.



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An opportunist may also be referred to as a "manipulator."

VOCABULARY

BOUNDARY

A personal limit that protects our body, feelings, and values.
It helps us decide what behavior is acceptable or unacceptable.





This 3-minute Walking Wise animated video series teaches how sexual predators use manipulation, intimidation, and coercion to exploit young people.

NOTE

Log in to Walking Wise.com to watch the three-minute animated video with audiences.

Is animation appropriate for teens?

Yes, even businesses worldwide use explainer-style animation as a training tool for their employees.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What are ways a groomer might target young people?

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POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Gaining Trust

Giving Attention

Love & Care

Giving Gifts

Giving Money

Flattery

Compliments

Making Promises

Promising a Better Life

ANSWERS

Gaining Trust

Giving Attention

Love & Care

Giving Gifts

Giving Money

Flattery

Compliments

Promising a Better Life

GROOMING PROCESS

The Grooming Pattern

FRIENDSHIP → TRUST → DEPENDENCE → CONTROL

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To gain trust, groomers often begin by giving a young person things that make them feel valued and cared for. This may include extra attention, compliments, kindness, gifts, or promises of love and support.

At first, these behaviors may seem positive or harmless. However, the goal is often to build a special connection so the young person begins to trust the groomer more than others.

Once trust is established, the groomer usually begins to manipulate the relationship to gain influence and control.

Young people should learn that predators often start by acting kind and supportive before their behavior becomes harmful.

GROOMING PROCESS

Groomers Often Follow Patterns

Step 1: Gain Trust

They try to become someone the young person trusts.

Step 2: Look for Needs

They look for struggles or needs they can take advantage of.

Grooming is usually a process that happens step by step.

The predator first becomes trusted, then looks for weaknesses or unmet needs, and finally tries to make the young person dependent on them.

GROOMING PROCESS

Groomers Often Follow Patterns

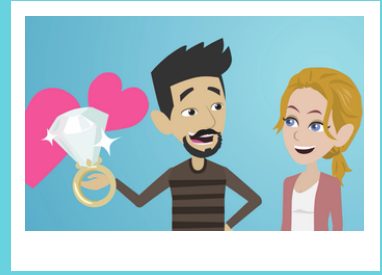
Step 3: Fulfill Needs

They provide attention, gifts, or support to make the young person rely on them.

Step 4: Control

They begin making demands, using pressure, threats, or secrets to control the young person.

WHY TRUST MATTERS



Why do groomers work to gain trust?



WHY TRUST MATTERS

How Trust is Used by Groomers

- Once trusted, it is easier to identify a young person's **needs or struggles**.
- It is more likely **they will share** their personal problems.
- It is easier to gain **influence over a young person's** decisions.
- It is easier to cross personal **boundaries**.
- It reduces the chance that a young person will **say "no."**

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Trust is normally healthy in relationships, but predators misuse it. When someone trusts another person deeply, they may ignore warning signs or feel pressure to cooperate.

VULNERABILITIES

The groomer learns the youths' vulnerabilities and how to exploit them.

PERSUASION

Targeted youth may sense that the expectation is inappropriate, unfair, or illegal, but once the groomer gains trust, they can persuade the victim to cooperate.

LESS RESISTANCE

The targeted person is less likely to resist or challenge the requests made of them.

CONTROL

It is easier to manipulate and control the victims once trust is gained, especially when the victims are younger.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What percent of victims said their trafficker gained their trust within one month?

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Source

Thorn (2018). Survivor Insights: The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, p. 27.

https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Thorn_Survivor_Insights_061118.pdf

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What percent of victims said their trafficker gained their trust within one month?

- A) 12%
- B) 22%
- C) 32%
- D) 42%

ANSWER

42% of victims said their trafficker gained their trust within one month.

Unsafe adults often move much faster than people expect. Building trust quickly helps them control the situation.

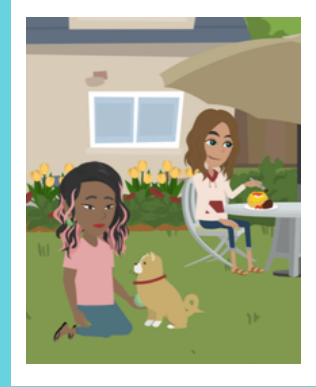
Source

Thorn (2018). Survivor Insights: The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, p. 27.

https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Thorn_Survivor_Insights_061118.pdf

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

How can groomers be “hidden in plain sight”?



HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Why Groomers Often Go Unnoticed

- They can appear as **trusted adults or friends**.
- They may hold **positions of authority**.
- They often **already know the young person they target**.
- They can earn the **trust of parents and other adults**.
- Groomers can **fool everyone, even an entire community**.

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The phrase “hidden in plain sight” means someone can appear normal or trustworthy while hiding harmful intentions.

Groomers often work to build a good reputation so others will not suspect them.

They may be respected adults, family friends, or people involved in school, sports, or community activities. Because they appear trustworthy, their behavior may go unnoticed for a long time.

It's important not to be afraid, but to recognize unsafe behaviors, even when the adult, older teen, or peer seems friendly or respected.

GROOMERS

What roles or positions might a groomer hold?

GROOMERS

Family Members

- **Parent, Stepparent, Foster Parent**
- **Aunt or Uncle, Grandparent, Sibling**
- **Other Relative**



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Groomers are not usually strangers. In many cases, they are someone the young person already knows or trusts.

The purpose of this lesson is to help us understand that grooming can occur in many different types of relationships. Because of this, it is important to recognize unsafe behaviors, rather than focusing only on who the person is or what role they hold.

Most people in these roles genuinely care about young people and want to protect them. However, when someone manipulates, pressures, or crosses personal boundaries, that behavior is unsafe.

GROOMERS

Trusted Adult or Community Member

- Teacher
- Coach
- Counselor
- School Staff
- Religious Leader
- Employer or Boss
- Police Officer
- Doctor / Dentist



GROOMERS

Peer or Other Relationships

- Friend
- Romantic Partner
- Older Teen
- Classmate
- Neighbor
- Acquaintance



GROOMERS

Stranger

- Online Connection
- Someone Unknown



VOCABULARY

'VIRTUAL' STRANGER

Someone met online whose true identity and intentions cannot be verified or confirmed.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What percent of minors (ages 9 to 17) reported connecting online with adults they don't know in person?

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n=1,200 minors

33

SOURCE

Thorn (2022, April). Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization, p. 14. Retrieved January 12, 2026, from https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/2022_Online_Grooming_Report.pdf

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What percent of minors (ages 9 to 17) reported connecting online with adults they don't know in person?

- A) 22%
- B) 52%
- C) 82%
- D) 92%

ANSWER

82% of minors interact online with adults they do NOT know in person.

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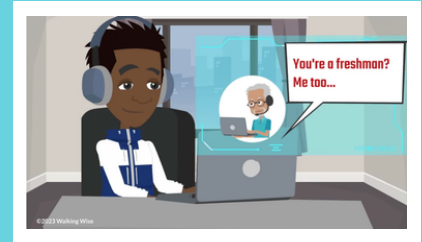
Thorn (2022, April). Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization, p. 14.

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SOURCE

Thorn (2022, April). Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization, p. 14. Retrieved January 12, 2026, from https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/2022_Online_Grooming_Report.pdf

VIRTUAL STRANGER



Adults online can pretend to be someone they are not.



VIRTUAL STRANGER

Adult Connections

- Survey: **1-in-4 teens** (ages 13-17) said they interact online with someone they believe is 30 or older.
- Survey: **2-in-3 children** (ages 9-12) said they interact online with adults they don't know in real life.

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Thorn (2022, April). Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization, p. 14.

n=1,200 minors

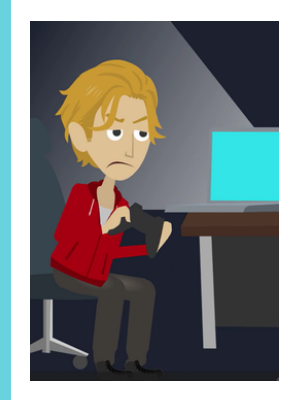
37

SOURCE

Thorn (2022, April). Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization, p. 14. Retrieved on 10/31/2024m from https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/2022_Online_Grooming_Report.pdf.

CONNECTIONS

How do groomers often meet the young people they target?



CONNECTIONS

Meeting Targeted Individuals

- **Online:** Social media apps and gaming platforms
- **Public Places:** Parks, concerts, shopping malls
- **Social Gatherings:** Friends' parties and local meet-up spots
- **Acquaintances:** Someone who already knows the young person

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ONLINE

Groomers can attempt to gain a young person's friendship online using social media apps and gaming platforms.

PUBLIC PLACES

They can meet young people in public places like parks, concerts, and shopping malls.

SOCIAL GATHERINGS

They might meet a youth at a friend's or acquaintance's party and pretend to be interested in developing a friendship or romantic relationship.

ACQUAINTANCES

They often already know the youth, so they work to build a special relationship by pretending to share interests or hobbies.

VOCABULARY

MIND GAMES

Tricking or influencing someone's thoughts and feelings so they begin to believe or follow along without questioning.



VOCABULARY

ISOLATE

To separate or cut someone off from their support network of family or friends.



LOYALTY & OBLIGATION

Groomers often manipulate young people to create a false sense of loyalty or obligation.



LOYALTY & OBLIGATION

Feelings of Guilt or Pressure

- Groomers can use **gifts, money, basic needs, or special favors** to create a sense of owing something to them.
- They often give **praise or compliments**, especially to someone who feels left out or unsure of themselves.
- They may make **risky or harmful behavior** seem normal, exciting, or grown-up.
- They often use **guilt or sympathy** to create emotional attachment.
- They can use **favoritism** to separate a young person from peers.

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Kindness should never come with pressure, secrecy, or expectations in return.

Groomers often create a feeling that the young person “owes” them something because of gifts, attention, or kindness.

This manipulation can make it harder for the young person to say no or recognize that something is wrong.

Groomers may also use compliments, sympathy, or favoritism to make the young person feel special and emotionally connected to them.

Over time, these tactics can create a sense of loyalty, guilt, or pressure, which the groomer later uses to influence the young person’s decisions.

VOCABULARY

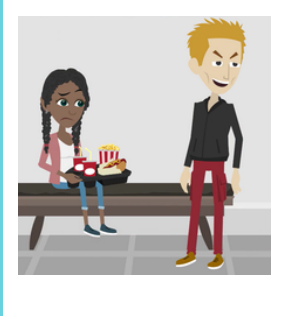
BOND

A bond is something that makes a person feel connected, dependent, or unable to leave.



CREATING DEPENDENCE

How can groomers manipulate young people to make them feel dependent?



CREATING DEPENDENCE

How Groomers Become “Needed”

- Groomers may provide **basic needs** like money, food, or a place to stay.
- They might give clothing, phones, rides, or other favors.
- They may offer free **alcohol or drugs**.

Healthy relationships do not create pressure, control, or dependence.

Some groomers try to make young people feel they need them to get important things. This might include money, food, clothing, transportation, or a place to stay.

Over time, the young person may begin to rely on the groomer for their daily needs.

Providing substances to young or vulnerable people creates dependency that often leads to control. Drugs and alcohol can increase a victim's economic, physical, and emotional reliance on their trafficker.

GROOMERS CHANGE

After gaining trust, groomers change their behavior to gain control.



GROOMERS CHANGE

The Shift from Kindness to Demands

- Groomers **take control** by making demands.
- They might **threaten to take away support**, like money, housing, gifts, or affection.
- They often **isolate the young person** by pressuring them to pull away from family and friends.
- They may apply pressure to **break rules or rebel** against adults like parents, coaches, and teachers.

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Healthy relationships do not involve threats or isolation from family and friends.

Once the groomer gains trust and influence, their behavior changes. They usually start making demands, using pressure, or threatening to take away things they previously provided.

Groomers may encourage the young person to rebel against trusted adults in their life, such as parents, teachers, or coaches, by breaking rules or ignoring expectations.

They may also pressure the young person to drop out of activities, teams, or clubs that keep them connected to supportive people.

This shift from kindness to control is an important warning sign.

UNREPORTED CRIME

Many crimes involving abuse are never reported.



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Abuse is never a young or vulnerable person's fault.

Sometimes it can be hard to ask for help, but telling a trusted adult is an important step toward safety and support.

Many victims do not report abuse right away, and some may never tell anyone.

Groomers often use fear, threats, manipulation, or shame to keep victims silent.

Victims may also blame themselves or feel embarrassed about what happened.

Oftentimes, the groomer slowly normalizes the behavior so the young person does not immediately recognize that it is wrong or illegal.

UNREPORTED CRIME

Why Many Victims Stay Silent

- Victims may feel **threatened, scared, or embarrassed.**
- They feel **ashamed or blame** themselves.
- The predator may make the abuse seem **“normal.”**
- Some **do not realize** that what is happening is a crime.

VOCABULARY

FREEDOM

To allow someone the power to move or think, speak, and choose for themselves without restriction.



EMPOWERMENT

How young people can help protect themselves.



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TRUST YOUR FEELINGS: If something feels wrong, trust your instincts or intuition. Groomers might try to make you feel obligated, but feeling uncomfortable is a valid signal.

SET BOUNDARIES: Communicate your boundaries and stick to them. Don't let anyone cross the line to pressure you into doing something that makes you uncomfortable.

BE ASSERTIVE: Practice saying a firm "NO" without hesitation. If someone makes you feel uncomfortable, you're not obligated to give them any time, attention, or explanation.

RECOGNIZE MANIPULATION: Think about the manipulation tactics you've just learned groomers use, such as guilt trips or emotional control. Being aware helps avoid falling into their traps.

EMPOWERMENT

Ways to Protect Yourself

- Trust your instincts or feelings.
- Set clear boundaries.
- Say “NO” confidently.
- Recognize manipulation.

EMPOWERMENT

Important Safety Steps

- **Stop communicating with the person.**
- **Keep messages and images as evidence.**
- **Ask for help until someone listens.**

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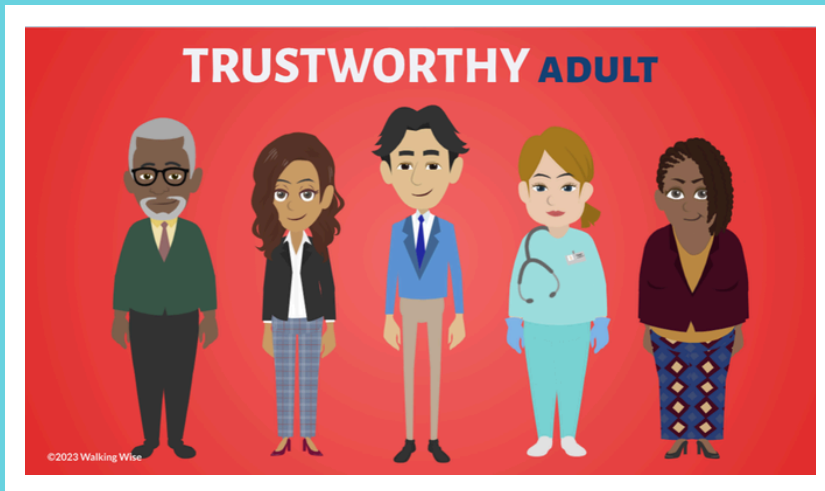
Remember that your well-being comes first. Don't feel obligated to hang out with someone who makes you feel awkward or asks you to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable.

END COMMUNICATION: Discontinue all communication, even if frightened by threats or embarrassed by what happened.

PRESERVE EVIDENCE: Keep all communication received from the groomer, including any embarrassing texts, online messages, images, and any threats received, for evidence so law enforcement can investigate.

ASK FOR HELP: When feeling at risk, immediately inform a trustworthy adult. If that adult does not help, go to other trustworthy adults, such as an adult who has the authority or connections to help you break free of a sexual predator's influence. Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline 1-888-373-7888.

ASK FOR HELP



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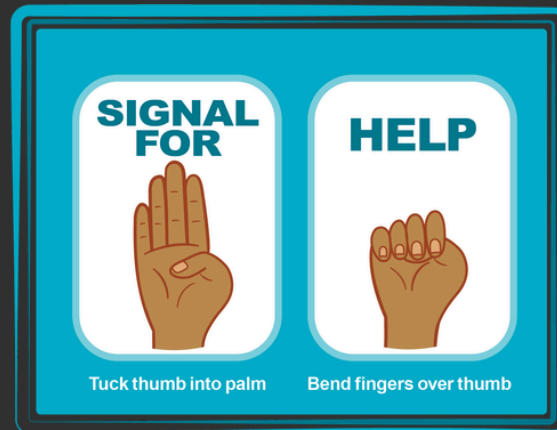
Walking Wise asked a focus group of survivors:
What do you think young people should know about sex trafficking?

ANSWER

The survivors agreed that the most vital information teens should know is how to ask for help.

At the top of their list:
Tell a TRUSTWORTHY adult.

HAND SIGNAL FOR HELP



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Source: Canadian Women's Foundation, April 2020

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Although the hand signal for help has not yet achieved universal recognition, it may quietly get someone's attention in urgent situations.

SILENT

It can be used silently.

UNTRACKABLE

It leaves no digital footprint.

CONCEALED

It can be done secretly when a perpetrator is in the vicinity.

SIGNALS DISTRESS

A distressed facial expression can help others recognize that help is needed if the hand signal is not understood—but it is important not to alert the predator/trafficker, causing harm.

Source

Canadian Women's Foundation, April 2020

24-Hour Hotline for Help

- ✓ National Human Trafficking Hotline 888-373-7888 or TEXT 233733
- ✓ Rescue America 833-599-FREE (3733)
- ✓ National Sexual Assault Hotline 800-656-HOPE (4673)
- ✓ National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 800-THE-LOST (843-5678)
- ✓ National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-SAFE or TEXT 88788
- ✓ National Runaway Safeline 800-RUNAWAY (786-2929)

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NOTE TO PRESENTER

Presenters may ask their audience to consider adding a few "hotline for help" phone numbers to their cell phone contacts or take a photo of this slide.

Thank you!

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NOTE TO PRESENTER

To access additional resources on the grooming process, please see the last page of Lesson Plan #3 on the Walking Wise Learning Platform.

We welcome your feedback at support@WalkingWise.com.