

Manipulation – The New *Grooming*, or Maybe What It Has Been All Along

Why do we use the word “grooming” to describe offender behavior? This article is not about semantics, it is about the importance of the language we use in the everyday investigation and prosecution of child abuse. It is also about how we communicate the information we know to those who don’t work in the child abuse field (jurors, family members, the community, etc.).

Language is important in how we talk about all types of things. Many years ago we identified intellectually disabled individuals as retarded. We used to describe young sex trafficking victims as child prostitutes, and images of child sexual abuse as child pornography. There has also been some move to redefine non-offending caregivers as involved caregivers because we don’t always know if a caregiver is an offender or not, but we do know they are involved.

Let me focus on grooming versus manipulation. If you look at the definitions from the Merriam Webster dictionary, grooming is defined as:

1. To clean and maintain the appearance of (as the coat of a horse or dog),
2. To make neat or attractive (an impeccably groomed woman),
3. To get into readiness for a specific objective - prepare (was being groomed as a presidential candidate).

Do any of these really describe what we know to be grooming in child sexual abuse incidents? You could make the argument that 3. somewhat describes what we know to be true, but let’s look at the definition for manipulation:

1. To treat or operate with or as if with the hands or by mechanical means especially in a skillful manner,
2. To manage or utilize skillfully or to control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage,
3. To change by artful or unfair means so as to serve one's purpose.

When I think about grooming, definitions 2. and 3. seem to more accurately describe what offenders do on a regular basis. In all other settings, grooming is used to describe pro-social behavior, but I surely don’t think child sexual abuse is pro-social behavior. To me, this behavior is decidedly anti-social, so why are we using a pro-social word to describe anti-social behavior?

Would you rather be groomed or manipulated? There is a more negative connotation associated with manipulation, and most people feel taken advantage of when they are manipulated. I think we should change our language to better describe the behavior of offenders. We should call these behaviors **manipulation**. Additionally, this new term will help jurors and others better understand what has actually happened in these cases.

Finally, we must also recognize that manipulation is not just focused on children in child sexual abuse cases. Offenders also manipulate their broader community and involved caregivers/significant others so they can gain access to children while being thought of as a “good guy”. This behavior is insidious and artful, but it is not OK – it is **Manipulation!**