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How to Talk to Your Child About Sexual Grooming—Without Freaking Them Out

Daniel Pollack and Anna Sonoda | October 24, 2025



The sinister trademark of sexual groomers is their nuance. Using charm, attentiveness, and availability, they gradually build trust, not only with a child, but their caregivers. They're not the shadowy strangers warned about in scary stories. More often, they're familiar faces. And this is where it gets confusing for parents.

Ignore the risk, and children are left vulnerable. Describe the threat too vividly, and you risk igniting fear instead of awareness. Many parents we work with ask: How do I teach my child about grooming without scaring or confusing them?

Here's the truth: You can't do this perfectly. But you can do it lovingly and clearly, at every stage of their development.

Before jumping into this conversation, pause. Ask yourself:

- Who in our family is best suited to have this talk with this child?
- Would a quiet one-on-one feel safest or would a joint conversation with both parents feel more supportive?
- Are there cultural or family dynamics that might affect how the message is given and received?

This isn't about saying things "just right." It's about knowing your child, taking a breath, and starting the conversation. You can take it bit by bit, with regular conversations. Prevention starts with connection.

Each age brings a different level of understanding, so let's help you tailor your teaching to your child's age and stage.

Ages 3–5: Teaching Body Ownership and Respect

Key Objectives:

- A child's body belongs to them.
- Only specific (named) adults are allowed to help with private tasks like bathing or toileting.
- Safe adults always listen when they say "no."
- Surprises are okay, but secrets are a no-no.

Evidence-based rationale: Children at this age learn best through repetition and structure. Teaching them who can help with their bodies sets up clear expectations, making it easier for them to notice when something feels off.

Ages 6–8: Teach Strange Behavior, Not Stranger Danger

Key Objectives:

- Not all unsafe people look, or act “mean” or “scary.”
- Safe adults don’t ask a child to keep secrets or break rules.
- Strange behavior includes asking to be alone with a child, giving unwanted massages or tickles, or asking for photos.
- It’s okay to walk away or say “no” if someone’s behavior is confusing, even if it’s someone they know.

Evidence-based rationale: At this stage, kids can notice patterns and contradictions. Focusing on strange behavior (instead of “tricky people”) helps them recognize actions that are off, even if the person seems friendly or familiar.

Ages 9–12: Teach the Warning Signs of Grooming

Key Objectives:

- Grooming is when someone convinces you and your child that they are safe, even when they demonstrate strange behavior.
- Warning signs include compliments that feel too personal, isolating a child from friends and caregivers, secret keeping, or frequent touching or photographing.

- If something makes a child feel confused, uncomfortable, or ashamed, they can always come to you without getting into trouble.
- Encourage a child to speak openly about anything from gut feelings to grooming behaviors.

Evidence-based rationale: Tweens are gaining awareness of social nuance.

Teaching them to spot patterns and power plays (not just danger signs) helps prevent manipulation before it escalates.

Ages 13–15: Teach Them How Flattery and Isolation Can Be Misused

Key Objectives:

- Unsafe adults or older teens may use compliments, attention, or secretive communication to test their boundaries.
- If someone tries to isolate them, emotionally or physically, that's a warning sign.
- Real connection never comes with guilt, pressure, or secrecy.
- They can always come to you, even if some rule is broken.

Evidence-based rationale: Teens need honest, shame-free information. Teaching them how grooming can feel good at first helps dismantle myths and keeps communication open if grooming begins.

Ages 16–17: Teach Them to Trust Their Gut and Spot Coercive Adults

Key Learning Objectives:

- Authority figures (teachers, coaches, bosses, etc.) can misuse their role for personal gain.

- Strange behavior includes repeated flattery, favoritism, pushing physical expectations, or encouraging rule breaking and secrecy.
- They have the right to ask clarifying questions, reject touch, or report strange actions, even if they're unsure what it's called.
- They are never “too old” to be protected or supported.

Evidence-based rationale: Older teens navigate environments that mimic adulthood. They benefit from direct honest conversations about how coercion works in real life, especially in high-trust settings like school, work, sports, and mentorships.

Remember: You're not only teaching your child what's wrong, but you're also teaching them what safe, respectful relationships look and feel like.

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