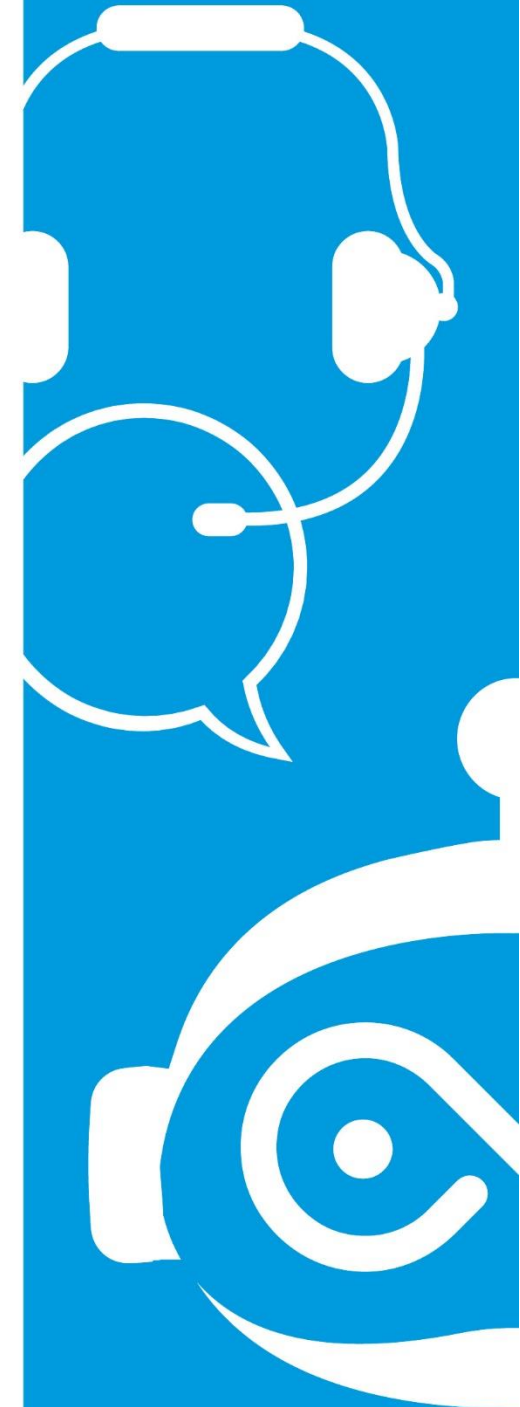




ONLINE ABUSE: GROOMING OF YOUNGSTERS

What is it?

Grooming is a **digital phenomenon** wherein an adult deliberately befriends and establishes an emotional connection with an underage user in order to gain their trust and exploit them. As such, it is a form of online abuse that manifests as sexual abuse, intimate-photo coercion, trickery to obtain financial information, and can take on other harmful forms.

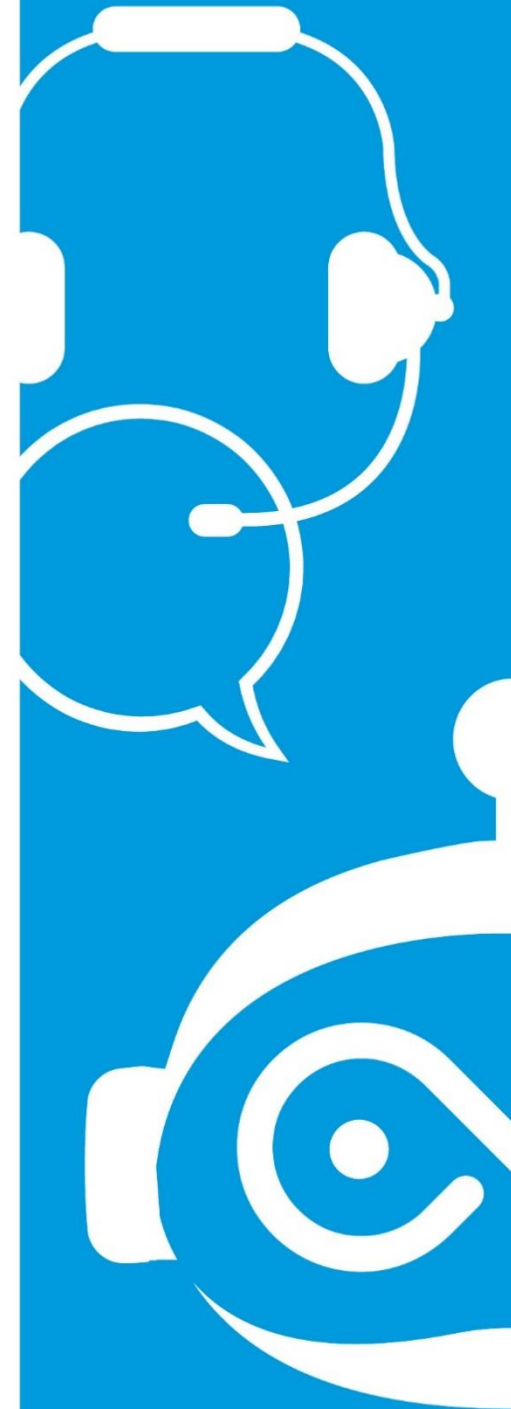


How can it impact the sexual and reproductive health of youth?

Perpetrators that groom youngsters (known as 'groomers') may or may not mask their age when talking with users online. Oftentimes, they may come across as a role model, celebrity or career advisor, so as to lower youngsters' defences that they can trust them as a mentor figure. Experts in the field of online safety warn that some populations of youth are statistically more at risk of being groomed: girls, between the ages of 13 and 17, LBGT+ youth, and especially youth with disabilities due to factors including overprotection, social isolation and society refusing to view them as sexual beings.

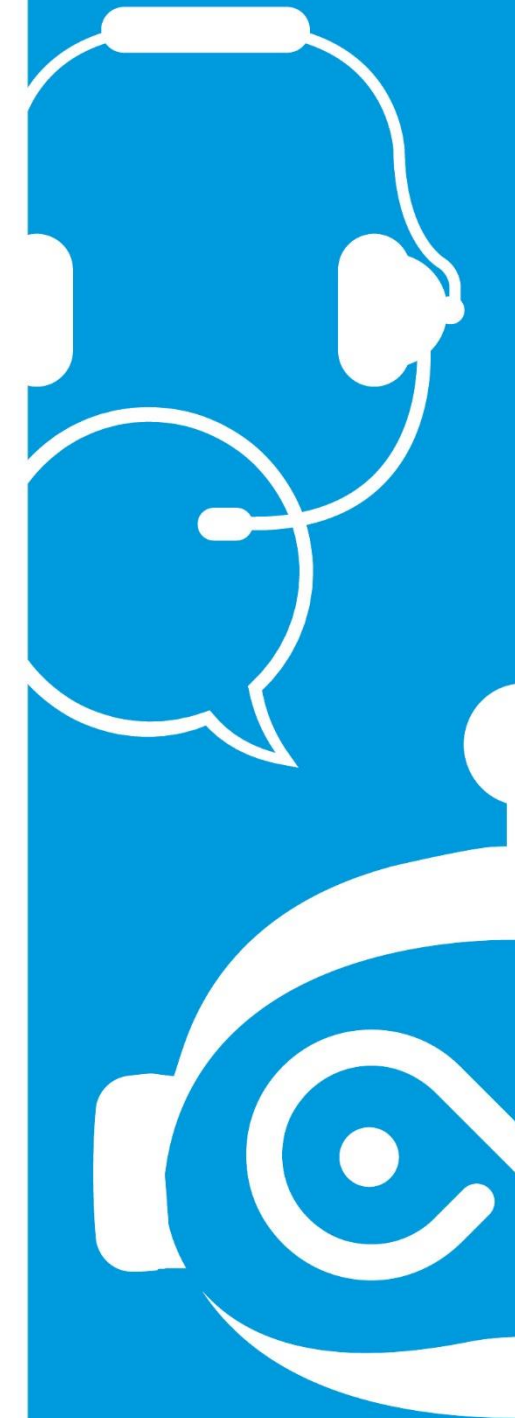
Being solicited by a groomer can heavily impact the developing SRH of youth due to the methods used by these perpetrators. The first stage of grooming entails the groomer isolating their underage victim by sending them private messages, away from group settings. They seek to cultivate a sense of love and understanding, warping the youngster's view of healthy consensual relationships.

Once trust has been established, the groomer progresses with introducing sexual situations in their interactions, intentionally exploiting young people's natural curiosities regarding their changing bodies and stimuli. This can take on the form of asking inappropriate questions about their sexual and relationship history.



Supporting youth's sexual & reproductive health in the digital age: BEST PRACTICES

The final stage of grooming is maintaining this sexual control over the youngster, and escalating sexual advances, such as soliciting intimate photos from the youngster and even trafficking them. The perpetrator will threaten to humiliate or abandon the victim if they reveal the nature of their relationship to others. Eventually, youngsters who have been victimised are likely to suffer from serious long-term mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts.



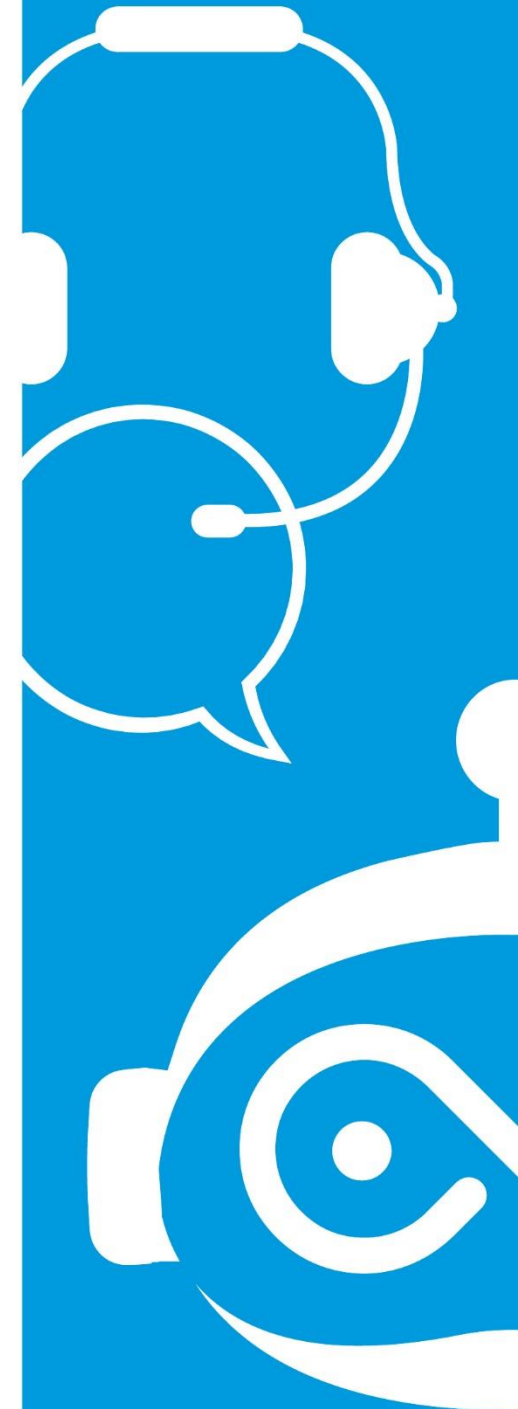
What are some ways in which youth can be supported?

- Recognise the signs of grooming to talk to youth or intervene if the situation has escalated. This may look like: being very secretive about how they're spending their time, having an older boyfriend or girlfriend, having money or new possessions that they can't or won't explain, underage drinking or drug taking, spending more or less time online or on their devices, sexualised behaviour, language or an understanding of sex that's not appropriate for their age
- If youth are adamant about meeting with a friend they've met online, instruct them on precautions to take: do not meet them alone, do not meet them in a private place, and keep location services on for a trusted adult to follow their whereabouts.
- Take advantage of reporting or blocking tools. If a young person comes to you with concerns of harassment, educate them that they have autonomy online to restrict others from reaching out to them.

Related digital phenomena/tools:

See sheets:

- Apps: Socialising/dating apps
- Privacy: Setting privacy settings
- Gender-based violence: Coercive control of technology



Further reading:

- Childnet. "Online Grooming," n.d. <https://www.childnet.com/help-and-advice/online-grooming/>.
- Darkness to Light. "Grooming and Red Flag Behaviors," 2019. <https://www.d2l.org/child-grooming-signs-behavior-awareness/>.
- Ellis, Bolt Burdon Kemp-Marlon. "Children with Learning Disabilities Face Greater Risk of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse." Lexology, October 8, 2015. <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=799ecb70-bca2-40e5-882a-8a44ff0d7243>.
- NSPCC. "Grooming." NSPCC, n.d. <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/grooming/>.

