

Parents and caregivers can play an integral role in protecting children from sexual assault. The majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim already knew; offenders are frequently friends, family members, or acquaintances to those they victimize.

Before assaults occur—especially those committed by someone known to the victim—offenders groom victims and families to gain their trust and confidence. This grooming process is a critical time for parents and caregivers to identify the potential risks to children.

Understand the grooming process used by offenders. Many perpetrators:

- *Work to gain the trust and confidence of future victims, their families, and the community*
- *Slowly introduce children to sexual types of touch, with escalating inappropriate behavior over time*
- *Manipulate children, using tricks or threats to keep the abuse secret*

Know who your child spends time with, and watch for warning signs that grooming is taking place.

It is important to look for patterns of behavior involving several of the characteristics below. A potential offender may be someone who:

- *Is exceptionally charming and/or helpful*
- *Attempts to obtain immediate “insider” status*
- *Consistently prefers the company of children to adults, rather than looking for age-appropriate companionship*
- *Attempts to establish peer relationships with people much younger than themselves*
- *Fails to honor clear boundaries set by parents*
- *Roughhouses, wrestles or tickles children after being asked to stop*
- *Invades children’s physical space in front of other trusted adults so that the child perceives it as normal or acceptable*
- *Seeks opportunities to be alone with children, such as offering to babysit*

If you think a child is being groomed, trust your “gut feeling” and act on it

- *Listen for statements or questions from your child indicating that the person makes them uncomfortable*
- *Encourage your child to tell you more about the time he or she spends with the person*
- *Assert yourself and end questionable behavior*
- *Do not leave children unattended with someone you believe may be engaging in grooming behavior*

Give your child tools to help identify inappropriate behavior:

- *Talk regularly with children about touching rules and use anatomically correct language*
- *Encourage children to talk to you if someone breaks the touching rules, make sure they understand that it is not their fault and they will not be in trouble*
- *Talk with children about secrets, tell them it is always ok to talk with you if someone is forcing them to keep a secret*
- *Teach and model consent, empower children by respecting their right to say no to things that make them uncomfortable*