THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Safeguarding: Online Grooming

Key definitions:

Online Grooming: The process by which an individual (often an adult) builds an emotional connection with a child or young person via the internet to gain their trust for the purpose of sexual abuse, exploitation, or trafficking.

Grooming Behaviours: Actions intended to manipulate or control a child, such as flattery, gift-giving, secrecy, or isolating them from trusted adults, often escalating to requests for sexual content or in-person meetings.

Exploitation: The act of taking advantage of a child or young person for sexual, criminal, or financial purposes, often following a grooming process.

Sextortion: A form of exploitation where an offender threatens to share sexual images or information unless the victim complies with demands (e.g., sending more images or money).

Catfishing: Using a fake identity online to deceive and manipulate someone, often as part of grooming or exploitation.

Trust-Building Phase: The initial stage of grooming where the offender seeks to establish rapport and emotional dependency before introducing harmful requests.

Key Statistics

7,263 online grooming offences were recorded by UK police in the year to March 2025 – almost double the 2018 figure.

Since 2017, more than 41,000 online grooming crimes have been recorded across the UK.

Girls account for around 80% of victims in cases where gender was known.

Snapchat is involved in nearly half (48%) of cases, making it the most common platform for grooming. For over 40% of victims, cyberstalking lasted more than two years, showing its persistence and long-term impact.

Key signs to look out for

- Secretive online use (hiding screens, defensive).
- Spends excessive time online, especially late at night.
- Unexplained gifts or money from online sources.
- Sudden mood or behaviour changes linked to device use.
- Mentions a new online 'friend', often older.
- Insists on secrecy about conversations.
- Exposure to sexual content or sending such material.
- Plans or hints at meeting someone offline.

What might this look like in church life?

- Private, personal messages via church apps or social media.
- Encouraging one-to-one chats and leaving group conversations.
- Frequent or late-night contact unrelated to church activities.
- Flattery or offering gifts (including digital).
- Requests for secrecy about conversations.
- Introducing sexual topics or images gradually.
- Suggesting private meetups outside normal church events.

How to respond if a young person discloses online grooming

- Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse | The Church of England
- Reporting Safeguarding Concerns and Allegations | The Church of England

Always follow your diocese's safeguarding procedures and the Church of England safeguarding e-manual. When in doubt, seek advice from the DSO rather than trying to resolve the situation alone.

Key messages for children and young people

- It's never your fault – if someone makes you feel uncomfortable online, you are not to blame.
- Tell a trusted adult immediately – don't keep secrets, even if the person asks you to.
- Never share personal details or images with someone you only know online.
- Don't agree to meet someone you met online – always speak to a parent or carer first.
- Block and report anyone who asks for inappropriate content or makes you feel unsafe.
- You have the right to feel safe online – help and support are always available.

Further information & up-to-date guidance

Church of England resources:

- Safeguarding e-manual
- National safeguarding training portal

UK Government / UKCIS guidance:

- UKCIS – Education for a Connected World & Online Safety Guidance
- Metropolitan Police – Grooming Advice
- CPS – Stalking or Harassment Guidance

NSPCC & specialist services:

- NSPCC – Grooming: What It Is and How to Protect Children
- The Cyber Helpline – Online Grooming Resources
- CEOP Safety Centre
- Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) – Resources
- Childline – Online Grooming Advice