

# Grooming within organisations - how to keep children safe



**Katie Rigg and Professor Andy Phippen | 21 January 2016**

Understanding what grooming is and learning how to identify it are fundamental to preventing abuse within an organisation.

## **Serious Case Review into William Vahey**

The Serious Case Review ("SCR") into the crimes committed by William Vahey was published yesterday and can be accessed [here](#). It is a case study on grooming in an educational setting and refers to how Vahey developed a modus operandi of "hiding in plain sight" in order to gain access to his victims.

For those of you who are not familiar with the case, Vahey taught at international schools throughout his life. In 2014 he was discovered in possession of a number of abusive images of students, images which it would appear he obtained having drugged students on school trips that he ran. Vahey committed suicide following the reporting of these images to the FBI. It is now known that Vahey's criminal behaviour spanned over 40 years and may have occurred in up to 10 international schools in 9 different countries.

The SCR report provides valuable insight into the modus operandi of a very sophisticated groomer. It also sets out a number of lessons which can be learnt from this case and which are applicable and relevant to all organisations working with children. Indeed, the school featured in this SCR is eager for the lessons which can be learnt from this case to be shared with the education community more widely.

## **Grooming**

Grooming is the process by which an individual prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for abuse of this child. Perpetrators of grooming manipulate their victims over a period of time, sometimes years, gradually gaining the victim's trust, desensitising and sexualising them for the purposes of abuse. Victims are taught to respect, trust and sometimes love their perpetrator and the betrayal of that trust can result in severe long-term trauma. The damage caused by grooming can be irreparable. It frequently takes place undetected by others and it is rarely disclosed by the victim.

Organisations which work with children have a critical role to play in preventing, identifying and reporting cases of grooming. Adults working with children are uniquely placed to spot signs of distress in a child and are often the first to identify and report child abuse. These organisations can however also pose a risk to children when they unwittingly enable and facilitate grooming or abuse. This can occur, for example, when members of staff or individuals associated with the organisation use

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their position to gain access to and groom/abuse children, or when grooming/abuse is perpetrated by a child or young person within an organisation – for example, online by a pupil in a residential setting.

### **Paradigm Patterns of Grooming**

Grooming can take many forms. This article focuses on (a) "in person" grooming within organisations and (b) online grooming.

#### *In person grooming within an organisation*

This type of grooming occurs when an individual associated with an organisation uses his or her position within that organisation to gain access to and groom a child. It can occur in any organisation which works with children and perpetrators can include individuals at all levels of an organisation including, for example, school teachers, sports coaches, religious leaders, volunteers, charity trustees, school governors, donors, supporters, agency workers and independent contractors.

Little is known about the frequency of sexual grooming within organisations. This is partly because grooming is often unreported or concealed in other categories of abuse or crime.

#### *Online Grooming*

The online world presents greater opportunity for groomers both in terms of number of potential victims they can reach and the perceived anonymity of access. Online technology provides the means for all of us to communicate with others, regardless of location. Given the reach of social media (Facebook claims more than 1.4 billion active users, Twitter 302 million and Instagram 400 million) it is no surprise that such platforms are used by groomers to exploit the vulnerable. The nature of social media encourages us to communicate with others and, perhaps, have a more relaxed attitude toward our privacy and who we might consider to be friends. We can also view such technologies as platforms of shared interest – we trust the content, and contacts, of others we know, which is an ideal opportunity for a groomer to gain access. If a groomer can befriend one or two young people within a friendship group, it is more likely others will also accept their contact requests.

The case of Michael Williams highlights the opportunities presented via social media. Currently serving an eight and a half year sentence for 27 charges including inciting sexual activity, grooming and distributing indecent images, Williams initially used local contacts as both a postman and a member of a local football club as "offline" ways to approach young people but he greatly expanded the potential volume of access through 8 different online profiles. He used both Facebook and Bebo to approach victims and groom them for indecent interactions in private online communications, or to meet up physically where abuse would take place. During the investigation the police identified approximately 500 victims but officers estimated that there were around 1000 victims in total.

Another high profile case, which illustrates the reach of groomers in an online environment, is that of Amanda Todd, a Canadian teenager who sadly committed suicide in 2012. Three years earlier Amanda had been "befriended" on a webcam chat service, by an individual who then spent approximately one year trying to get her to indecently expose herself to him. After a year, Amanda eventually did bear her breasts during a webcam conversation with the individual, who then captured the

image and got in contact to say that unless she gave him “a show” he would release the image to her friends. The groomer subsequently released the image online and the bullying and abuse Amanda received by her peers ultimately resulted in her committing suicide, after releasing a video on YouTube detailing her experiences ([youtube](#)). In 2014 police eventually tracked a groomer in the Netherlands who was linked, although never charged, with crimes related to Amanda’s abuse and extortion. He was, however, charged with a number of offences involving the production and distribution of indecent images of children, and grooming, crimes related to abuse carried out in his own country.

### **The Legal Framework**

There are a number of offences which have been introduced in an attempt to protect children from grooming although a lot remains to be done, particularly in light of recent technological advances which have presented far greater opportunities for groomers.

#### *Meeting a Child Following sexual grooming*

This offence is designed to protect children from both in person and online grooming. It is set out in section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 ("the Act") which makes it an offence for an adult aged 18 or over to meet or arrange to meet an individual they do not reasonably believe to be over 16 if that adult (a) has previously met or communicated with the child on at least two occasions; and (b) intends to commit a sexual offence against that child. There is no requirement for the adult to have actually met the child nor is there a requirement for the communications to be sexual in nature.

This offence is punishable by up to ten years imprisonment and in determining the length of sentence the offender's *intention* will be key – the more serious the offence intended, the greater the offender's culpability. Where an adult is convicted of this offence he or she is automatically barred from engaging in regulated activity with children and with vulnerable adults (Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006).

#### *Preparatory offences*

The Act also creates a number of preparatory offences which may be relevant in grooming cases. These include:

- drugging a person with intent to engage in sexual activity with that person (section 61);
- committing any offence with intent to commit a sexual offence (section 62); and
- trespassing on any premises with intent to commit a sexual offence (section 63).

#### *Sexual Communication with a child*

This is a relatively new offence which came into force in 2015 (section 67 of the Sexual Crime Act 2015). It attempts to deal with the growing issues caused by technological advances which have given rise to an increase in the culture of "sexting", the sending of sexually explicit content, primarily via mobile technology.

This offence will be committed where a person above the age of 18 either (a) intentionally engages in sexual communication with an individual they do not reasonably believe to be over 16, for the purposes of sexual gratification; or (b) communicates with an individual they do not reasonably believe to be over 16 with the intention of eliciting a sexual communication from the recipient. A communication is defined as sexual if any part of it relates to sexual activity or where a reasonable person would, in all the circumstances, consider it to be sexual. The offence is punishable by up to two years in prison.

### Modus Operandi

There is a great deal of research into the methods offenders use to groom children, whether in person or online. The Council of International Schools, for example, provides the following checklist on institutional grooming:

- *Target vulnerable victim* - Perpetrators target victims who are vulnerable, isolated, insecure and/or have greater emotional needs. These victims are easier to control and manipulate.

***"I would probably pick the one who appeared more needy... Someone who had been a victim before: quiet, withdrawn, compliant"***

#### Quote from an abuser

- *Gain victim's trust* – Institutional offenders often abuse the power and influence inherent in their position within an organisation in order to gain the victim's trust. Offenders may allow a child to do something (e.g. eat ice cream, stay up late, view pornography) which is not normally permitted by the child's parents or the organisation in order to foster secrecy.

***"I look for a child who seems to be lonely or sad or looking for attention. Then I take my time gaining her trust and becoming her friend. In time she will do anything I ask."***

#### Quote from an abuser

- *Gain the trust of others* – Institutional offenders are often popular with children and parents, successfully grooming not only the victim but also other members of the victim's family and the community at large. Offenders sometimes do this by being exceptional or inspiring teachers or leaders or by consistently praising the victim to his or her parents. This facilitates the offender's access to the victim and makes it harder for the victim to speak out when abuse occurs.
- *Filling a need / becoming more important to the child* - This can involve giving gifts, rewards, additional help or advice, favouritism, special attention and/or opportunities for special trips or outings. This can be particularly powerful when carried out by a professional who the child looks up to and seeks approval from.

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”

***"No-one has shown interest in me like this before, he made me feel special and told me I was special and that I was the only one he wanted to be with."***

#### **A young person reporting to ChildLine**

- *Isolating the child* - The perpetrator may encourage dependency and subtly undermine the victim's other relationships with friends or family members. Once isolated, victims are more easily exploited and manipulated into sexual relationships.
- *Sexualising the relationship* - This can involve playful touches, tickling and hugs. It may involve adult jokes and innuendo or talking as if adults, for example about marital problems or conflicts. It can involve overly graphic and inappropriate sexual education classes by teachers or leaving sexual material out where the victim can see them. This desensitises the victim, preparing him or her for sexual abuse.
- *Maintaining control and secrecy* - Offenders may use their professional position to make a child believe that they have no choice but to submit to the offender. This process often involves secrecy and blame, the offender may blackmail or threaten the child, make them feel ashamed or guilty, or make them feel the emotional cost of losing the only "loving" relationship he or she has.

***"He said to me that he loved me and that I should do things for him and if I didn't he'd start shouting at me, it's my fault I agreed to meet him."***

#### **A young person reporting to ChildLine**

#### **Diverse nature**

We should also acknowledge the diverse nature of grooming, and also the platforms on which it takes place. While the "classic" view of an online groomer would be an adult male grooming a young person online for sexual reasons, we should also acknowledge that grooming behaviours also happen within peer groups and those whose ages might be far close together that we might expect.

The recent IPCC investigation related to the murder of Breck Bednar highlights this point. Breck was befriended and groomed by someone four years older than him via gaming servers, where the abuser established a small group with access to "exclusive" servers for the game they were playing – Minecraft. Over a period of time the abuser, Lewis Daynes, isolated Breck from his family and ultimately paid for Breck to visit his flat, where he murdered him. While Breck's mother had contacted the police to relay her concerns about Daynes the IPCC inquiry highlighted failings to recognise these concerns as grooming, with the call handler even recording "Nothing to suggest this is grooming".

This case also highlighted the use of gaming platforms for grooming – it is not just social media where online contact happens. If we are to consider a gaming platform not simply as a means for players to play a video game together, but as a massively connected community of online peers, all of whom share a common interest, we can

see how such environments would be targets for groomers – they have potentially a large pool of victims to access, and they have the “common interest” in which to befriend them before moving toward the standard practices of isolation and private communication.

Behaviours associated with peer sexual interaction, such as sexting among teens, can be also be used by those exhibiting coercive and grooming behaviours. The work of Ringrose for the NSPCC (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/qualitative-study-children-young-people-sexting-report.pdf>) highlighted the fact that among peer groups teens have experienced the use of sexually explicit “selfies” as a mean to coerce further sexual acts, or to engage in a pattern of behaviour to try to obtain such images in order to achieve further control over the victim. While these might not be viewed as the typical scenario, there is certainly a growing body of evidence to show such practices among peers which would certainly fall into a broad definition of grooming.

Finally, we should highlight another growing area of concern around online technology, as very much a form of grooming – that being online radicalization. While the end goal for groomers in this instance is different from “typical” grooming – in that there is not a sexual goal, but one of recruitment to a political or terrorist cause, the techniques are the same and the approaches will often take place via online technologies such as social media and gaming with a similar practice – to befriend an individual then try to isolate them from peers and family before encouraging meetings to take the grooming further. Police forces have already highlighted a number of approaches that have taken place where gaming has been an element (for example Nasser Muthana) and it is important to be mindful that grooming can take many forms.

### Spotting the Signs

Grooming is often undetected by others and is particularly difficult to spot. Disclosures by victims are rare and adults (and children) within organisations must therefore be particularly alert to the signs of grooming exhibited by both victims and offenders.

#### *Signs manifested by victims*

- Missing from home or school
- Behavioural change
- Secretive use of mobile phones or the internet
- Unexplained gifts
- Older boyfriends - victims frequently identify the perpetrators as boyfriends or really good friends
- Suicidal, self/harming, feeling depressed, unworthy
- Alcohol or drug use
- Sexual health issues

#### *Signs manifested by the offender*

- Overly affectionate behaviour with a child
- Affording special attention or preferential treatment to a child

“Perpetrators target victims who are vulnerable, isolated, insecure and/or have greater emotional needs.”



- Excessive time spent alone with a child outside of the classroom/organisation
- Frequently spending time with a child in private or isolated areas
- Transporting a child to or from the organisation
- Making friends with a child's parents and visiting their home
- Acting as a particular child's confidante
- Giving small gifts, money, toys, cards, letters to a child
- Using texts, telephone calls, e-mails or social networking sites to inappropriately communicate with a child
- Flirtatious behaviour or making suggestive remarks or comments of a sexual nature around a child

Adults working with children should also be alert to any comments or jokes made by other children in the organisation.

#### *Talking to the child*

When an individual has a concern about a child the first port of call is often to talk to the child. This is a sensible approach although everyone should be aware that victims of grooming rarely disclose what is happening to them. This is because many children do not understand that they have been groomed, or that what has happened is abuse. Some children become convinced of the legitimacy of the relationship and believe that the offender truly loves them. Other children describe themselves as being in a cycle of fear and shame, where they think no one will believe what is happening and that they are to blame for the exploitation they are suffering. Many victims describe feeling worried about what people will think as they have let the situation go on for so long. They do not understand the role of grooming and believe that they must have consented and that they are to blame.

Grooming can affect any child. However, vulnerable children may be more at risk than others. They can include:

- Disabled children – research suggests that disabled children are over three times more likely to be abused (or neglected) than non-disabled children.
- Children who have been abused (or neglected) in the past.
- Children whose parents are under continued or increased stress, or who have problems with mental health, drugs or alcohol, domestic violence or learning disabilities - these problems can severely undermine a parent's ability to care for their child.
- Children living in poverty.
- Children who are isolated from friends and/or family.

#### **What should organisations do to prevent, identify and tackle grooming?**

- **Safer recruitment** - ensure that your organisation operates robust safer recruitment policies, including seeking and following up references, consistently referring to your organisation's commitment to safeguarding throughout the recruitment process (including in all advertisements, person

specifications and job descriptions), carrying out criminal records checks (including overseas checks where appropriate), ensuring that all staff involved in recruitment undergo safer recruitment training, and critically assessing the candidate's ability to form trusting and appropriate relationships with children. Consider for example using value-based interview techniques. For further information please see Marcus Erooga's article [Towards Safer Organisations](#)

- **Reporting and recording concerns** – grooming is a subtle and gradual process and it is therefore essential that your organisation has procedures in place which enable it to spot subtle patterns of behaviour. This includes (a) ensuring that there are clear procedures in place for parents, children, staff and other individuals associated with the organisation to report any concerns or unusual behaviour, no matter how trivial. These procedures should be known and understood by everyone; (b) ensuring that at least one senior person within the organisation has sight of all reports of such concerns; and (c) ensuring that all reports are recorded centrally, with the name of the person about whom the report relates clearly stated on the form.
- **Open culture** – having the correct procedures in place is not enough. Organisations must also ensure that people within or associated with their organisation feel comfortable making reports. This requires a culture of openness, transparency and vigilance without paranoia. Achieving this balance can be difficult. Leadership and training are key. The way in which reports of concerns are dealt with by senior managers will also have a bearing on this. All reports should be dealt with sensitively and with discretion.
- **Mandatory reporting and self-referral** - consider mandatory reporting of certain incidents to the DSL (e.g. when a member of staff or volunteer has been alone with or gives a gift to a child, or of any of the signs listed above). This removes any discretion on behalf of the person reporting the incident and it will help organisations to spot subtle patterns of behaviour. Requiring staff and other individuals associated with the organisation to self-refer can also be helpful to creating a culture of openness and raising awareness of boundaries and risks amongst these individuals. A failure to self-refer can also indicate a problem.
- **Training for staff and other individuals associated with the organisation** - train your staff, volunteers and other individuals associated with your organisation about how to spot signs of grooming. The Local Authority training for professionals in schools may not include this. Poor quality training can propagate unhelpful myths and finding the right training is crucial. Check the credentials of the trainer and ask for recommendations.
- **Educating children** - educating pupils is also key. Research indicates that children have very little awareness or understanding of grooming. The concept of “Stranger Danger” is well developed but children are very rarely told about the risks of grooming by someone they know. This should be done without unduly frightening the child or damaging their ability to form trusting relationships with adults. Achieving this balance can be difficult - there are a number of resources online which are aimed at assisting parents and organisations, including the NSPCC Underwear Rule ([Link](#)) and [schoolcounselingbyheart](#). Most of these resources are aimed at schools or



parents but the principles contained within them can be applied to other organisations working with children.

- **Clarity of guidelines / code of conduct** - ensure that you have clear and appropriate guidelines on personal-professional boundaries, including on social events, communications on social media and friendships/relationships. There should also be clear rules on adults being alone with children and on children's access to adult's private rooms or accommodation (particularly in a residential setting). Clear rules on trips are also key – individuals working with children should not be able to take children out of the organisation unless it is part of an official and regulated trip, and all trips should be planned and notified to senior managers in advance. These rules should be unambiguous, widely communicated and supported by in-house training. Again, a balance is key and severe rules prohibiting any physical contact or appropriate care behaviours are likely to be inappropriate.
- **Photography and video** - ensure that you have appropriate policies on the use of photographic/video equipment and photos and films. Record and investigate any breaches of this policy.
- **Attendance and absence records** - ensure that your organisation has in place a clear procedure for monitoring attendance and recording absences. Any unexplained absences should be recorded centrally alongside other child protection reports.
- **Pastoral care** - focus on implementing a strong culture of pastoral care within your organisation. By looking after the emotional health and wellbeing of children organisations can help build resilience to grooming and increase the chance that it will be disclosed and/or detected. Organisations should also be sensitive to the devastating and long-term effects of grooming and where appropriate should put in place measures to help victims deal with these.

If you require further information on anything covered in this briefing please contact [Katie Rigg \(katie.rigg@farrer.co.uk\)](mailto:katie.rigg@farrer.co.uk); [Professor Andy Phippen \(andy.phippen@plymouth.ac.uk\)](mailto:andy.phippen@plymouth.ac.uk) or your usual contact at the firm on 020 3375 7000. Further information can also be found on the [Child Protection](#) page on our website.

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