

Learning to Recognise the 6 Stages of Grooming

Grooming is a manipulative process used by perpetrators to build trust with a child or young athlete in order to facilitate abuse and maintain secrecy. It often develops gradually over time, making it difficult to recognise in its early stages.

As awareness of abuse and trauma in sport has increased, it has also become clear that the impact of grooming and abuse can be profound and long-lasting. The consequences can affect not only the athlete who has experienced harm, but also their families, teammates, and wider support networks.

It is common for parents or caregivers to believe that they would immediately notice if something was wrong. However, grooming behaviours are often designed specifically to avoid suspicion. Individuals who engage in grooming frequently work to gain the confidence of both the athlete and the adults around them.

Grooming can occur over weeks, months, or even years. During this time, the individual may build relationships with the athlete's family, offer additional support or opportunities, and gradually create situations that allow increased access to the child or young person. This manipulation can make it more difficult for athletes and families to recognise concerning behaviour.

It is important to understand that abuse can occur in any aquatics environment and can involve individuals who appear trusted and respected within the community. For this reason, awareness and education is essential in helping athletes, parents, coaches, other athlete support personnel and organisations recognise warning signs and take appropriate action.

Understanding the stages of grooming can help individuals identify patterns of behaviour that may place young athletes at risk and support early intervention to protect those involved in sport.

1. Targeting the Athlete

An individual may identify athletes who are particularly motivated, seeking additional support, or eager to progress in their aquatic sport. They may use their authority or influence to position themselves as someone who can help the athlete improve or access opportunities.

Example: A coach may single out a promising athlete and offer extra attention or special opportunities.

2. Gaining Trust

The individual may gradually build trust with the athlete and their family by appearing supportive, helpful, and dedicated to the athlete's development. This behaviour can make the relationship appear positive and legitimate, which can reduce suspicion from those around them.

3. Meeting Emotional Needs

The individual may provide special attention, praise, gifts, or opportunities in order to build a sense of loyalty or emotional dependence. Over time, this can blur normal professional boundaries and make the athlete feel indebted to the individual.

4. Isolating the Athlete

Opportunities may be created to spend time alone with the athlete, away from teammates, parents, or other adults. This may involve private training sessions, offering rides, or increased direct communication such as private messaging.

Example: An athlete may be encouraged to attend additional one-on-one sessions or communicate privately outside of team settings.

5. Sexualising the Relationship

Once trust and dependency have been established, the individual may begin to introduce inappropriate behaviour. This can include boundary violations, inappropriate physical contact, sexualised comments, or personal discussions that are not appropriate within a coach-athlete relationship.

6. Maintaining Control

If abuse occurs, the individual may attempt to maintain control through secrecy, manipulation, or intimidation. The athlete may be pressured not to speak about the behaviour, or made to feel responsible for protecting the individual or the team.

Why Awareness Matters

Recognising grooming behaviours early is an important step in safeguarding athletes. Open communication, clear professional boundaries, and transparent training environments all contribute to safer sport.

Athletes should know that they can speak up if something makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe, regardless of who is involved. Coaches, parents, and sport organisations also play an important role in ensuring that concerns are taken seriously and addressed appropriately.